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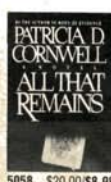
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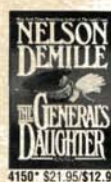
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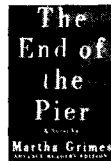
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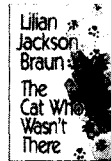
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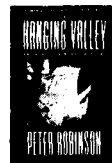
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On our cover is
EVAN HUNTER
a.k.a. **ED McBAIN**
(see page 49)

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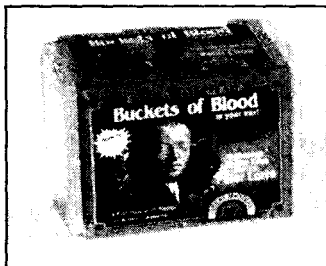
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a **NEW** short story by

P. D. JAMES

Over the past year, EQMM has published several stories entitled "The Man Who . . ." Many of you who have noticed this will already know that the titles, and the stories themselves, pay homage to the fine British writer and critic Julian Symons, whose eightieth birthday was marked by a volume published in the U.K. containing these stories. Long before his first mystery novel was published in 1945, Julian Symons was known as a leading poet and literary critic; since then, devotees of the mystery have claimed him as their own. The eighty-year-old in P.D. James's story has little in common with the dynamic novelist and reviewer the story honors, but we have no doubt that Mr. Symons found this story as diverting as you will. . . .

THE MAN WHO WAS EIGHTY

P. D. JAMES

Mildred Maybrick, seated in the front left-hand seat of the Daimler, thumped her copy of the *Times* into a manageable shape and said: "I see from the paper that Father shares his birthday with Julian Symons. They're both eighty today. That should please him. Quite a number of distinguished people have their anniversaries today, but Mr. Symons is the only one who is Father's age exactly. Quite a coincidence."

Rodney Maybrick grunted. Since neither their father nor either of them personally knew the distinguished crime writer, he couldn't see why Mildred regarded the felicitously shared birthday as a coincidence. He wished, too, that she wouldn't read the paper while he was driving. The perpetual rustle distracted him and, more dangerously, she was apt to turn over the pages with a flourish of disjointed

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leaves which momentarily obscured his vision. It was a relief when she completed her scrutiny of the court pages and the births, marriages, and deaths, banged the paper into shape, although hardly the shape the publisher intended, and tossed it on the top of a wicker picnic basket on the backseat. She was now able to give her attention to the purpose of their journey.

"I've put in a bottle of Pouilly-Fuissé as well as a thermos of coffee. If Mrs. Doggett puts it in the fridge as soon as we arrive, it should be drinkable before we leave."

Rodney Maybrick's glance was fixed on the road ahead. "Father has never liked white wine, except for champagne."

"I daresay not, but I thought champagne was going a bit far. Mrs. Doggett would hardly like champagne corks popping all over Meadowsweet Croft. It's upsetting for the other residents."

Her brother could have pointed out that for a mild three-person celebration it was only necessary for one cork to pop, and that this was hardly likely to provoke a Bacchanalia among the elderly residents of Meadowsweet Croft. He was, however, not disposed to argue. On the subject of their father the two were as one, their alliance, offensive and defensive, against that difficult old man had for over twenty years given an appearance of sibling amity which, without this common and reconciling irritant, it would have been difficult for them to sustain. He said:

"This was a particularly awkward day for me to get away. I had to rearrange a number of appointments at considerable inconvenience to important patients."

Rodney Maybrick was a consultant dermatologist with a large and highly lucrative practice which caused him little inconvenience. His patients rarely called him out at night, never died on him, and, since they were as difficult to cure as they were to kill, he had them for life. Mildred could have pointed out that the day wasn't a particularly convenient one for her either. It had meant missing the Finance and General Purposes Committee of the District Council who could hardly be expected to arrive at sensible decisions without her. In addition, it was she who had the trouble of preparing the picnic. Mrs. Doggett, the warden of Meadowsweet Croft, had telephoned to say that a tea party for the residents had been arranged for four o'clock, complete with birthday cake, and it was to avoid this gruesome celebration that Mildred had said firmly that they could be there for luncheon only and would bring a picnic to be eaten either in their father's room or in the garden. Since she, too, would

be sharing it, she had taken some trouble. The picnic basket contained salads, smoked salmon, tongue, cold chicken, with fruit salad and cream to follow. Enumerating these delights she said: "I only hope he appreciates it."

"Since he has shown no signs of appreciating either of us for the last forty years, he is hardly likely to begin now, even under the stimulus of a bottle of Pouilly-Fuissé and the heady excitement of his eightieth birthday."

"I suppose he would argue that he passed over to us Uncle Mortimer's three million and that was appreciation enough. He'd probably say that he'd been generous."

Rodney said: "That wasn't generosity: merely an extremely sensible and legal device for avoiding capital transfer tax at death. It was family money anyway. Incidentally, he made the gift seven years ago today. He can die tomorrow and it will all be tax free."

Both reflected that this was, indeed, a birthday well worth celebrating. But Mildred reverted to a perennial grievance.

"He has no intention of dying, and I don't blame him. He can live another twenty years for all I care. I only wish he'd drop this obsession about moving to Maitland Lodge. He's perfectly well looked after at Meadowsweet Croft. The home is extremely well run and Mrs. Doggett is a most capable and experienced woman. The local authority have a very good reputation for their geriatric services. He's lucky to be there."

Her brother changed gear and turned carefully into the suburban road leading to the home.

"Well, if he thinks we're going to find thirty thousand a year between us to pay for a place at Maitland Lodge, it's time he faced reality. The idea is ludicrous."

They had had this conversation many times before. Mildred said:

"It's only because that dreadful old brigadier is there and keeps visiting Father and telling him how wonderful the place is. I think he even took Father to spend a day there. And it's not even as if they're old friends. Father only met him on the golf course. The brigadier is a bad influence on Father in every way. I don't know why they let him out of Maitland Lodge. He seems to be able to hire cars and travel the whole country at will. If he's so old and frail that he needs to be in a Home, they should see that he stays there."

Both Rodney and Mildred had every intention of seeing that their father, Augustus, stayed in Meadowsweet Croft. Although eighty, he was not particularly frail, but a total inability to cook for himself

or, indeed, do anything which he regarded as women's work, coupled with an acerbic tongue which had driven away a succession of housekeepers except those who had been alcoholic, mad or kleptomaniac, had made residential care inevitable. It had taken his children considerable time and trouble to persuade him into Meadowsweet Croft. The relief for them, if not for him, had been considerable. They told him on their infrequent visits that he was a very fortunate old man. He even had a room to himself where he was able to display the results of his lifelong hobby, a collection of ships in bottles.

Meadowsweet Croft was nowhere near a meadow, nor was it a croft, and it could only have been described as "sweet" by a visitor partial to the smell of lemon-scented furniture polish. It was, however, very well run, almost aggressively clean, and the diet so carefully balanced in accordance with modern theories about the feeding of the elderly that it would have been perverse to expect it also to be palatable. Mrs. Doggett was an SRN but preferred not to use the title or wear her uniform since, after all, Meadowsweet Croft was not meant to be a nursing home and her old dears shouldn't be encouraged to think of themselves as invalids. She encouraged exercise, positive thinking, and meaningful activity, and was occasionally a little discouraged to realise that all the activity her residents wanted was to watch television in the lounge with their chair backs placed firmly against the wall as if to guard against the possibility of anyone creeping up on them during the more enthralling moments of *Bergerac* or *Blind Date*. They had had a lifetime of exercise, positive thinking, and meaningful activity. It has to be said that Mrs. Doggett and the residents in general got on very well together, with the exception of one central misunderstanding. She took the view that the old people hadn't come to Meadowsweet Croft in order to live a life of self-indulgent idleness, and the old people thought that they had. But they recognised that there were worse places than this Home, the grave for one, and when Mrs. Doggett proclaimed, as she frequently did, that she loved her old dears, really loved them, she spoke no more than the truth. In order to love them the more effectively she made sure that they were never out of her sight.

This constant surveillance was helped by the architecture of the Home. It was a single-storey, U-shaped building built round a courtyard with a central lawn, a single tree which obstinately refused to thrive, four precisely arranged flowerbeds which were planted with bulbs in the spring, geraniums in the summer, and dahlias in the

autumn. The courtyard was furnished with solid wooden benches so that the residents could in summer take the sun. Each bore a plaque with the name of the person it commemorated, a memento mori which might have distressed users less tough than Mrs. Doggett's old dears. They had, after all, survived sixty-five years or more of the twentieth century.

It isn't easy to manage a satisfactory picnic sitting in line on a hard bench with no table. Mildred had thoughtfully provided large paper napkins and they sat in a row with these on their laps while she passed plates of salmon and ham and distributed lettuce leaves and tomatoes. The other benches were unoccupied—the residents had no great love of fresh air—but they were watched by interested eyes while, across the courtyard, Mrs. Doggett occasionally waved an encouraging hand from her office window. Augustus Maybrick ate heartily but in silence. Conversation was perfunctory until the fruit salad was finished when, as his children expected, he embarked on his old grievance.

They listened in silence, then Rodney Maybrick said: "I'm sorry, Father, but the idea is impossible. Maitland Lodge costs thirty-five thousand a year and the fees will almost certainly rise. It would be an insupportable drain on our capital."

"The capital which you wouldn't have had if it weren't for me."

"You passed over to Mildred and me the greater part of Uncle Mortimer's legacy and naturally we're grateful. We can assure you that the money hasn't been wasted. You wouldn't have made over the capital if you hadn't had confidence in our financial probity and acumen."

"I didn't see why the bloody government should get it."

"Precisely."

"But now I don't see why I shouldn't have a bit of comfort in my old age."

"Father, you're perfectly comfortable here. This garden really is delightful."

"This garden is hell."

Rodney said: "In leaving the capital to you, I'm sure Uncle Mortimer thought of it as family money to be properly invested and left in turn to your children and grandchildren."

"Mortimer never intended anything of the sort. That last Christmas, when we were all together at Pentlands, the Christmas he died, he told me that he was proposing to send for his solicitor as soon as the office opened after the holiday, and to change his will."

Rodney said: "A passing fancy. Old people get them. It's as well that he never got the chance."

His father said: "No. I saw to that. That's why I murdered him."

Mildred felt that the only possible response to this statement was: "What on earth are you saying, Father?" It was, however, a question which it was hardly logical to ask. Her father's voice had been embarrassingly loud and clear. While she was searching for a reasonable response, her brother said calmly:

"That's absolutely ridiculous, Father. Murdered him? How did you murder him?"

"With arsenic."

Mildred had found her voice. She said: "Uncle Mortimer died of a bad heart and viral pneumonia complicated by gastroenteritis."

"Complicated by arsenic."

"Where did you get arsenic, Father?" Rodney's voice was studiously calm. Unlike his sister who was perched rigidly upright on the edge of her seat, he stretched back in as relaxed a pose as the hardness of the bench permitted, like a man who is prepared to waste a little time indulging his father's senile fantasy.

"I got it from Smallbone, your uncle's gardener. He used to say there was nothing like arsenic for dealing with dandelions. When Mortimer found out he pronounced that the stuff was too dangerous to have about the place and made Smallbone destroy it. But Smallbone kept a small quantity of the arsenic for himself in one of those old-fashioned blue poison bottles. He told me that having it gave him a feeling of power. I can understand that. Knowing his opinion of his employer, I'm only surprised that he didn't use it on Mortimer before I did. I knew where he'd hidden it in the garden shed, so when he died I hid it even more securely. It gave me a sense of power, too. Smallbone always said that arsenic didn't deteriorate with age, and he was certainly right there."

Rodney said sarcastically: "And I suppose you administered it to Uncle in his medicine and, despite its well-known appalling taste, he drank it down immediately."

His father didn't at once reply. His sideways glance at his children was one of reluctant cunning mixed with a certain self-satisfaction. He said: "I suppose I'd better tell you the whole of it now that I've begun."

Rodney said repressively: "You certainly had. It's a complete fabrication, of course, but we may as well hear the whole story now that you've embarked on it."

"You remember that one-pound box of soft-centred Belgian chocolates that you brought your uncle for Christmas? I may as well say that he regarded it as a deplorably inadequate present. That may have been one of the reasons which led to his decision to change the will."

Mildred said: "Uncle Mortimer was addicted to soft-centred chocolates and they were the most expensive we could buy."

"Oh, I know that. You both spoke about the cost so frequently and so openly that I've no doubt his nurse, Mrs. Jennings, who is still alive, incidentally, will remember the gift. The arsenic I had was in the form of a white powder. I removed the base of the peppermint chocolate with a small sharp knife and replaced the peppermint cream with arsenic. I can't pretend the method was original but it was certainly effective."

His son said: "A fiddling job, surely. It can't have been easy without fear of subsequent detection."

"It was a comparatively simple task for someone who has succeeded in building the *Cutty Sark* in a gin bottle. But your uncle wasn't after all going to examine the chocolate closely. I propped him up in bed and popped it into his mouth. He took one bite and swallowed it."

"Without complaining about the taste?"

"Oh, he complained about the taste, but I immediately popped in a raspberry cream and washed it down with a stiff dose of gin. He wasn't entirely compos mentis at the time. It was easy to convince him that he'd been mistaken about the bitterness of the first bite."

"And what did you do with the bottle of arsenic?"

There was a second pause, a second look of sly cunning. Then their father said: "I hid it in the blasted oak."

No explanation was necessary. Both his children knew precisely what he meant. The large oak tree on the outskirts of the grounds of Pentlands had been their tree in childhood as it had been their father's. It had been struck by lightning in a notable storm in the early 1900s but still stood, the boughs providing a wonderful climbing frame, its split trunk a hiding place large enough to conceal a small child.

Rodney Maybrick said: "All this is, of course, a fantasy, but I advise you to say nothing about it to anyone else. It may be amusing to you, and no doubt you take pleasure in its ingenuity, but other people may take a different view."

Mildred had been thinking. Suddenly she said: "I don't believe Uncle Mortimer seriously intended for a moment to alter his will. Why should he?"

"He disliked the thought of his money eventually coming to either of you. You, Rodney, had particularly displeased him. You insulted the woman to whom he was deeply, indeed passionately, devoted."

"What woman? I never even knew Aunt Maud."

"Not Aunt Maud, Mrs. Thatcher. You said you would rather dive into a tank of piranha fish than be a member of her cabinet."

"It was spoken in jest."

"A jest in very poor taste. Your perverted sense of humour could have lost our side of the family a considerable fortune if I hadn't remembered the arsenic."

Mildred said: "What about me? What am I supposed to have done?"

"With you it was more a question of being rather than doing. Greedy, selfish, tactless, and self-opinionated were some of the words he used. He said that God had given you a moustache to mark his regret at having made you a woman. Other remarks, which I'll spare you, were frankly uncomplimentary."

Mildred was surprisingly unperturbed by this diatribe. She said:

"That proves it. Obviously he was deranged. But if Uncle Mortimer meant to change his will, did he tell you to whom he proposed to leave the money? He had a great family sense, for all his faults. I really can't see him leaving it out of the family."

"Oh, he proposed to leave it in the family all right. It was all to go to the Australian cousins."

Mildred was outraged. "But he hadn't seen them for forty years! And they didn't need it. They've got millions of sheep."

"Perhaps he thought they could do with a few million more."

Rodney's voice was quietly ominous. "Why are you telling us all this, Father?"

"Because my conscience is troubling me. I'm an old man now coming to the end of my earthly journey. I feel I need to confess, to make my peace with the world and my Maker. You two have been for seven years in possession of money to which neither of you has any right. I had no right to inherit the three million in the first place and certainly no right to pass it on. These things weigh on an old man's mind. The air, indeed the whole atmosphere of Meadow-sweet Croft is conducive, I find, to feelings of guilt and remorse. Take the Sunday visits of the Reverend Hinkley when he, and the

members of his Women's Bright Hour, sing hymns for us round the piano in the lounge. Then Mrs. Doggett insists on turning on Radio Four very loudly every morning for *Thought for the Day*. And of course we have the children from the local comprehensive school who come to sing carols for us at Christmas, and the local church magazine brought round to us every month by the vicar's wife, always with a little encouraging homily. All these things have their effect. And then there's the food here, the unutterable boredom of the other residents, Mrs. Doggett's voice and incipient halitosis, and the hardness of the beds; constant if petty reminders of that hell which is supposed to await the unrepentant sinner. Not that I totally believe in eternal punishment, of course, but being required to live at Meadowsweet Croft does dispose one to a certain morbidity of mind."

There was a long silence. Then Rodney said: "This, of course, is blackmail and blackmail of a particularly inept kind. No one will believe you. The story will be taken as the ravings of an old man well-advanced in senility."

"Ah, but they can see I'm not, can't they?"

Rodney went on: "And who do you expect to believe you?"

"The Australian cousins may well. I feel particularly guilty about your Australian cousins. But it won't matter whether they do or not. There will certainly be in everyone's mind a very large element of doubt. As I said, it was a pity you made such a big thing of buying your uncle those chocolates. And then there's the fact that I passed the money over to you. That might look very like blackmail. I must say I don't think the District Council will like the story, Mildred. And as far as you're concerned, Rodney, I've a feeling that your most lucrative patients will be taking their acne elsewhere."

The silence this time was both long and profound. Then Rodney said: "We'll think it over. We'll let you know our decision the day after tomorrow. In the meantime, do or say nothing. Do you understand me, Father? Nothing."

The conversation had been so upsetting to Rodney and Mildred that they left Meadowsweet Croft without retrieving the Pouilly-Fuissé from the refrigerator. Mrs. Doggett felt justified in confiscating it as a raffle prize at the summer fund-raising fête of the League of Friends. So Mr. Maybrick never got his celebration drink, but he was consoled in his disappointment less by his aversion to white wine than by the knowledge that his children's birthday visit had really gone better than he could have hoped.

As soon as they had thrown off the suburbs of the town and were on a quiet country road, Rodney drove the car onto the verge and turned off the engine. There were decisions to be made to which both of them felt they could hardly give adequate thought in a moving vehicle. After a few minutes Mildred said:

"The whole thing is ridiculous, of course. The brothers never liked each other, but I don't think Father would go as far as murder. Still, it's just as well that Uncle was cremated. The doctor, apparently, never had the least suspicion."

"Doctors who make a practice of suspecting their middle-class acquaintances of murdering their relatives usually end up without any patients. Uncle Mortimer was dying in any case. If Father did murder him" —Rodney had some difficulty in getting out the word—"a confession can't bring him back."

Brother and sister took some comfort from the undeniable fact that nothing could bring Uncle back. Then Mildred spoke what was in both their minds.

"It would only be a couple of miles out of our way to go to Pentlands. If Father did throw the bottle into the oak it's probably still there. Without the evidence no one will take his story seriously. There's no point in putting it off. Now is as good a time as any."

Rodney said: "Who was it who bought Pentlands? Do you remember? I only know that the executors sold it below its worth."

"I think they were called Swingleton, an elderly couple without children. They're hardly likely to go climbing oak trees."

"I doubt that we'll find it easy now. I'm certainly too large to get into the trunk. If the bottle is there we'll have to hook it up."

"How are we going to do that?"

"I've got my walking stick in the boot of the car."

Mildred said: "Of course we may have trouble in actually finding it. Even on a bright May day like this it will be very dark inside the trunk."

Rodney spoke with some satisfaction: "I never drive without a torch. We can use that. The problem may be getting into the grounds. If the gate is locked we'll have to get over the wall. Well, we've done that often enough in our time."

Unfortunately the gate was locked. Although the stone wall was not more than five feet high, they had considerable difficulty in getting over and only managed it in the end with the help of a folding picnic chair from the back of the car. There was also the problem of passing motorists. Twice they had to desist at the sound

of an approaching car, pick up the chair, and peer in the grass verge as if searching for rare plants. Rodney in particular found it difficult to hoist up his sister while keeping his eyes and ears open and Mildred's tight skirt was an embarrassing hindrance. There is something peculiarly unedifying about the sight of a stout lady of forty-five stuck on the top of a wall with her legs waving, her skirt ruffled up to expose an undignified expanse of white knickers. He trembled to think what Sir Fortescue Lackland, his most distinguished patient, would think if he could see them now, and was only fortified to continue with the expedition by the thought of what Sir Fortescue would think if Father ever carried out his threat and confessed.

Eventually, however, they were over and, folding up the chair and picking up the walking stick, crept along the inner side of the wall towards the blasted oak. With the help of the chair, Rodney had no problem in reaching the necessary height and in peering down into the dark depths of the trunk. Mildred handed up the torch and he shone it down, illuminating the bed of shrivelled leaves, dried acorns, small twigs, broken pieces of bark, and a twisted white plastic bag. And beside the bag he could see something a great deal more interesting: a small dark blue bottle with ridged sides.

Mildred called out quietly: "Is it there? Is it there?"

"Yes, it's here."

But discovering the bottle was a great deal easier than retrieving it. Rodney found it impossible to manoeuvre the walking stick and at the same time hold the heavy torch, so both of them had to mount the chair, which creaked under their weight and, indeed, seemed in danger of collapsing. That catastrophe was averted when Mildred hooked her left arm round one of the lower boughs, thus releasing some of the weight. She shone the torch steadily into the trunk of the oak while her brother reached down with the stick. His plan was gently to edge the bottle to the side of the trunk, then hook it up. At first, to their horror, they were in danger of losing sight of it when it sank among the soft detritus of dried leaves. At the second try it became entangled with the white plastic bag. But at last Rodney managed to nudge it towards the edge and began the slow, careful, upward lift. Twice it got within reach of his left hand but twice it fell. But on the third attempt, not daring to speak in case even their breath dislodged it, the bottle came within reach of his stretched fingers and he was able to grasp it. Then, with relief, he jumped down from the chair and gave a hand to his sister.

"And what do you think you're doing?"

The voice, which literally caused them both to jump like startled cats and set their hearts pounding, was calm, authoritative, dismayingly upper class. They turned round and saw two young men in tweed caps and jackets. Mildred's first thought was that they were gamekeepers, but almost immediately she rejected this idea. The grounds of Pentlands were extensive, amounting to two or three acres, but hardly suitable for the rearing of game and the young men looked and spoke more like sons of the house than servants. One of them was actually carrying a gun. It was a moment of complete horror.

Her brother had been rendered speechless with shock and embarrassment but Mildred recovered herself with admirable speed. With an attempt at charm she said:

"I'm afraid you've caught us trespassing. We would have called at the front door and asked permission, but the gate was locked. My brother and I merely wanted to visit our uncle's old family home. We used to play here frequently as children during the holidays and this old tree is a part of our childhood memories. We were driving past and couldn't resist the temptation to visit it."

The taller young man said coolly: "Equipped with walking stick and chair. What precisely were you looking for?"

He shot out his hand and took the bottle. Rodney said: "We saw it lying there and were a little curious. It's nothing to do with us, of course."

"In that case we'd better take charge of it. It looks like poison to me. We'll see it's safely locked up." He turned to his companion. "Henry, do you think it's necessary to phone the police?"

Henry was nonchalant. "Oh, I don't think so. They look comparatively harmless. Almost respectable, indeed, although, of course, you can't tell from appearances. But we'd certainly better take charge of the bottle. And we'll take their names and addresses."

Rodney said promptly: "John Smith and Mary Smith. High Street, Tooting Bec."

The younger man smiled grimly. "Your real names and addresses, I think. Perhaps you have your driving licence on you. We need some means of identification."

The procedure of name taking took place in an embarrassed silence. Afterwards the Maybricks were escorted to the gate, which was locked after them. Dishevelled, dirty, and scarlet with shame, they looked like a modern Adam and Eve summarily ejected from Paradise. Neither spoke until they were again seated in the car and

Rodney had turned on the engine. Then Mildred said:

"If Father confesses now and it gets into the papers, those two men are bound to come forward. And they've got the evidence."

Rodney wished that his sister was less liable to state the obvious. Since there was nothing helpful to be said, he said nothing. He was only grateful that Mildred was apparently too dispirited to assail him for his folly in giving a false name. After a short pause, Mildred spoke again.

"Shall you get in touch with Maitland Lodge or shall I?"

In a well-regulated and moral universe Mr. Maybrick would no doubt have found Maitland Lodge a sad disappointment, the food indigestible, the wine undrinkable, the staff draconian, his fellow residents uncongenial, and the brigadier a far less agreeable companion under the same roof than he was as an occasional visitor to Meadowsweet Croft. Regrettably for the triumph of virtue over wickedness, Maitland Lodge more than lived up to Mr. Maybrick's hopes and expectations. He and the brigadier agreed that they could certainly aim to live there for the next ten years before wondering whether it was time to shuffle off this mortal coil. Mr. Maybrick was a great favourite with the staff, who regarded him as a "real character," particularly when he was at his most acerbic. He was especially matey with the buxom Nurse Bunting, who occasionally ministered to the residents' aches and pains. When wearing her impeccably starched blue and white uniform and goffered cap, Nurse Bunting was a model of professional rectitude. After duty hours, however, she would literally let down her hair and she and Mr. Maybrick enjoyed many cozy sessions in his room over his nightcap of hot whisky.

"You are awful about your family, Gussie," she occasionally protested. "No visits allowed, no letters, not even a box of chocolates."

"Particularly not a box of chocolates," said Mr. Maybrick.

One evening in late August, three months after his admission and at the end of a perfect summer day, he and the brigadier were sitting in their comfortable cushioned wicker chairs on the terrace looking out over the beautiful gardens of Maitland Lodge to the distant shimmer of the river. Badge the butler had just brought out their pre-dinner drinks and both were at peace with the world. The talk reverted, as it often did, to the circumstances under which this happy resolution had been achieved. The brigadier said:

"I'm still surprised that your children actually swallowed your story."

"I'm not. People are always ready to believe that others will act as they might have acted themselves. I had no doubt, too, they would call at Pentlands. What was more natural? Your men must have been very convincing though. Put the fear of God into them. Wish I'd been there to see it."

"Well," said the brigadier easily, "that's the advantage of being a soldier, you know. You can always find a couple of good chaps when you want a job done."

"What was it they put in the bottle?"

"You know what it was. Bicarbonate of soda."

There was a silence while the brigadier sipped his gin and tonic and Mr. Maybrick savoured his dry sherry. It was served at precisely the temperature he liked. He was pondering whether to try one of the delectable nuts or canapés on the drinks tray or whether that would spoil his appetite for dinner when the brigadier said:

"Question I've always wanted to ask you. Not sure whether I should. Some questions shouldn't be asked among friends. Still, a natural curiosity, don't you know. I just wondered—don't answer if you don't want to—whether you did help your brother on his way."

"Whether I murdered him?"

"Not to put too fine a point on it, yes. Not with arsenic, of course. Only a cad would use arsenic. That's the weapon of suburban poisoners and Victorian adulteresses. Still, there are other ways, presumably."

Mr. Maybrick appeared to consider the matter. "Well, if I had done it, I'd have used something quite simple. A plastic bag, for example. You just slip it over the head when the patient is sleeping, press it down firmly over the nose and mouth, and he goes out as gently as a sleeping child. I don't see how anybody could detect that."

The brigadier said: "You'd have to dispose of the bag though. Not easy to burn, plastic. What would you do about the bag?"

"Oh," said Mr. Maybrick, taking a further sip of his sherry, "I think I'd just throw it into the trunk of the blasted oak. Pass over the paper will you, Brigadier. What was it you said you fancied for tomorrow's two-thirty?"



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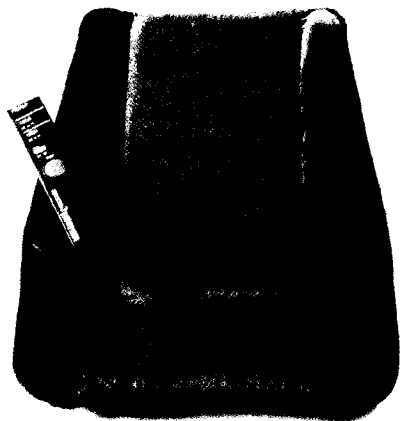
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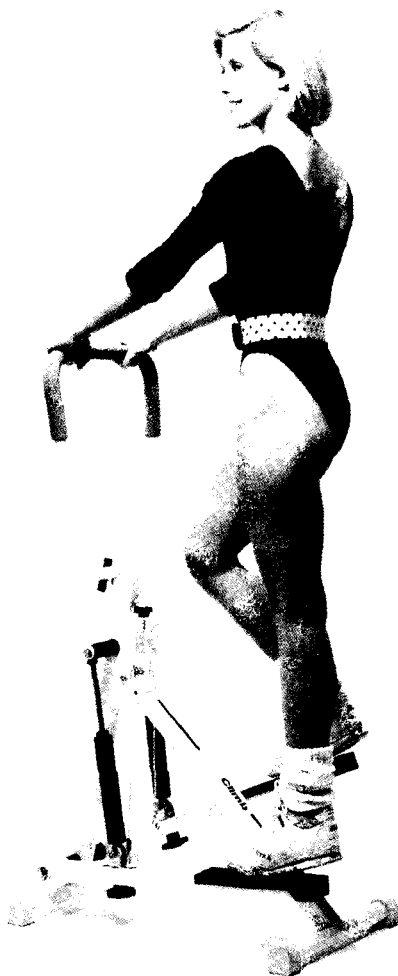
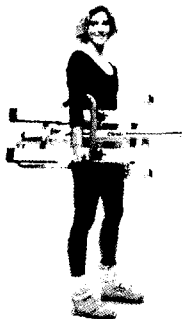


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a **NEW** short story by

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From 1990 to 1992, George Baxt lived in Los Angeles where he became interested in an ever more common phenomenon involving celebrities, the type of bizarre erotic fascination with the famous that can lead to death threats and murder: a subject the author effectively embellishes with his unparalleled gift for parody. . . .

UNEASY LIES THE DEAD

by **GEORGE BAXT**

The only restaurant in the United States boasting the cuisine of Tibet can be found on Melrose Street in Hollywood, California. The Deli Lama was established three years ago by a former sherpa, Mahut Watoo, and his unsanitary wife, Toma. Toma's shortcomings were long, but she was an excellent cook, although a disgusting housekeeper. The place was frequently cited for uncleanness by the Department of Health, but Mahut was an artist at weaseling out of accusations of infractions with a handshake that transferred a one-hundred-dollar bill from one palm to the other. Within a few weeks of its opening, the Deli Lama became one of Hollywood's most popular "in" places. At lunch you could find a large proportion of the film and television industry's heaviest honchos, wheeling, dealing, but more frequently reeling. The place was notorious for its Tibetan cocktails, the most potent of which was the Hillary High, named for Sir Edmund Hillary, who had conquered Mount Everest with Mahut as one of his sherpa carriers. It was rumored that Hillary had arranged for the Watoo family's escape when Tibet fell to the Chinese army.

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In a booth near the bar, which was the domain of Watoo's son Yabu, the famous television actress Monica Brant sat opposite her wicked half sister Cheryl. Cheryl, a friendly alcoholic who had recently shed her third husband, sipped a Hillary High and then toyed with the food in front of her.

"Don't you like it?" Monica asked, referring to the Reindeer Melt, which was a speciality of the house.

"I'm never very hungry when I'm engulfed in melancholia."

"Now what?" asked Monica, making no effort to cloak her impatience.

"Oh, all sorts of things," replied Cheryl airily. "No money, no man, no prospects, and an eviction notice."

"How could you have run through all that money Mama left you?"

"I had help." She dwelled briefly on the three bums she had married. Monica didn't miss the evil glint in her sister's eyes. "But I made each and every one of the S.O.B.'s suffer." She didn't elaborate. She didn't have to. Monica was well aware that all three men had sued Cheryl for divorce claiming mental cruelty and won handsome settlements.

"If you weren't so mean to them, you'd still be financially comfortable."

"I love being mean. You know that. I'm mean to everybody except you. I was never mean to you, was I? Even when you were a little girl, my baby sister."

"Setting fire to my braids wasn't being mean?"

"I told you I hated braids."

"Putting rat poison in my goldfish tank wasn't being mean?" Monica took a healthy bite of her caribou and tomato sandwich while wondering if ham and swiss on rye would ever make a comeback.

"I didn't do it to be mean. I did it to spite your father. I hated him."

"So did I. I'll never understand why Mama married him. Your legendary father was supposed to have been so kind and gentle and rich. Mine was rude and dumb and chewed his food with his mouth open. God, I still have nightmares about the crunching and the lip smacking and the juices seeping slowly out of the sides of his crooked mouth." Cheryl was staring into her drink. The pause in conversation gave Monica the opportunity to study this half sister who was five years older and had once been a regular on the Mickey Mouse Club. It was predicted that Cheryl would become the major star, but unlike Monica, who very early became wise in the ways of the

Hollywood world, Cheryl didn't sleep with the right people.

Only Brillo was a bigger household name than Monica Brant. Once her career in television was launched through the heavy-breathing auspices of a director doomed to expire from emphysema, Monica, to indulge in a rare cliché, took the bit between her teeth and ran a brilliant race to the top. Her minimal talent was offset by her superbly constructed body, her angelic face, her blazing mop of auburn hair, her menacing bosom, and her God-given gift for seducing the right men in the wrong place. Now she was in her eighth year as the star of the lousy nighttime soap *Betrayal*, and her fireplace mantel was graced by five Emmy awards.

"I'll have Irving deposit ten thousand in your checking account tomorrow," said Monica. Irving Gassner was her business manager, who didn't dare swindle her as he had swindled so many other clients because Monica was the darling of a headline-making official in the Justice Department.

"Thanks, half sis." Cheryl looked at Monica and didn't like the expression on her face. "What's wrong?"

"That little rodent-looking guy at the bar. He keeps staring at me."

"You mean the one who resembles Ross Perot?"

Monica had signaled Mahut Watoo, who hurried to their booth. She asked if he knew the man at the bar. Mahut didn't. "Would you please tell him to stop staring at me."

"Undoubtedly he recognizes you. You're very famous."

"And he's very rude. Tell him to stop." Mahut did her bidding and the man at the bar mouthed a nasty word and left. Mahut smiled as he favored the women with a shrug.

Cheryl asked, "Since when are you annoyed by people staring at you? It's been going on ever since you became a star. It's when they stop staring that you have to start worrying. I know. I wish they'd stare at me again."

"It's your own fault. Instead of pursuing your career, you chased after a succession of terrible men."

"It's not too late, Monica. Help me to get a new start. I've still got my looks. I'm younger than Rue McClanahan and certainly funnier. When I really doll myself up I almost resemble you." Monica studied Cheryl's face, now examining it in a new light.

"You know, I think you're right. There's a lot of Mama in both our faces. Except yours is so mean." Cheryl was being mean to the busboy clearing their table, which was a wasted meanness as the

young man, a recent wetback, didn't understand English. Monica was sitting back with her arms folded and scolded Cheryl. "For crying out loud, did you have to tell him he should use a deodorant in your loudest voice?"

"I can't help myself, Monica. It's like an uncontrollable reflex."

"Being mean is what helped stop your career dead. I'm not going to lift a telephone to help you until you promise to stop being mean. For crying out loud, you finally gave up smoking, now give up being mean."

Cheryl leaned forward and spoke with a heated intensity. "Monica, I promise. I swear on Mama's grave, if you'll help me get a new start, I'll do my damndest to stop being mean. I promise, I swear, help me, help me."

Monica contemplated Cheryl's misting eyes. She hadn't seen her sister cry since they watched a rerun of *Lassie, Come Home*. As Cheryl fumbled in her handbag for a tissue, a plan was forming in Monica's mind. Mahut brought them each a Deli Lama tea, which he knew would calm Cheryl as it was made from a Tibetan herb that, if used in a large quantity, could bring on a coma. He paid handsomely to have it smuggled into the country, defying being apprehended and flirting with a jail sentence, as he had the protection of several very powerful industry giants who were heavily addicted to this nameless narcotic. Monica looked at her wristwatch.

"I have to fly in a few minutes. I've an appointment downtown."

Cheryl sniffled and sipped some tea, which almost caused her eyes to cross. "What's downtown?"

"A detective named Herbert Villon."

Cheryl's eyes had widened, although her pupils had contracted. "What do you need with a detective?"

"Research. The producers want to get rid of Nathan Marcos, that slimeball who plays my lawyer, so he's going to be murdered in the next episode and I do the sleuthing. Mr. Villon very kindly offered to show me the ropes. Can I drop you anywhere?"

"No, I think I'll stick around and have some more tea. You wouldn't have a spare hundred on you, would you?"

Half an hour later, Monica parked her Mercedes in the station house parking lot. This was one time she preferred not to be chauffeured. She put on dark glasses and examined herself in the rear-view mirror. She opened her purse and smiled at the snub-nosed revolver that reposed among the other articles. She was early and didn't want to sit in the outer office if she had to wait until Villon

was free. He was the most respected and therefore the busiest officer in the precinct. She remembered when she first met him, three weeks earlier, when the first death threat was left on her answering machine.

Villon had arrived at her Bel Air mansion in an unmarked police car at the behest of Monica's lawyer, "Shifty" Lamarr. Lamarr was a throwback to Hollywood's heyday when he defended numerous celebrity killers, winning case after case with distinctly dubious tactics that won him the appellation "Shifty." His real name was Montague Levinsky, but he took the name Edward Lamarr in homage to his favorite star, Hedy Lamarr. Lamarr trusted Herb Villon implicitly. Herb had solved many difficult Hollywood murders and had a lot of friends in high places. Herb was in his mid-fifties, but looked younger. A bachelor, he considered someday writing his memoirs so he could name-drop the wide variety of celebrated ladies whom he had bedded. He fantasized that it would be an instant bestseller. On first meeting Monica, he fantasized grabbing her by the wrist and hustling her into her boudoir. But Monica, at the time, was more preoccupied with self-preservation.

They sat opposite each other in her tastefully furnished and decorated living room. Coffee and biscuits had been set out earlier by the butler, a former pugilist named Randolph "Cauliflower" Grant who also served as a bodyguard. Monica was nervous and fingered the string of pearls she wore around her neck. Villon attempted to put her at her ease. "Am I your first experience with a police officer?"

"It's my first experience with a death threat."

"You're sure it's not a practical joke?"

"If this is a joke, it's not terribly practical." She played the answering machine tape for him. Villon heard a man's voice. It wasn't natural. It was disguised, and it sounded nasty and unclean. He spoke first of his undying love, which made Villon suppress a chuckle, and then warned her to stop sleeping around or else he'd kill her. But first he threatened her with disfigurement. And then he suggested he might kill her anyway, just for the hell of it. Villon asked her to play the tape again and then again and then a fourth time.

"I'm trying to get a fix on the voice," he explained. "Each time I listen, I hear something fresh. I'll tell you this. He's a young man. If he's an actor, he's a pretty bad one, which gives me thousands of suspects, especially in this town. Now tell me the truth, is this the first time he's threatened you?"

Monica's hands, now tightly clenched, rested in her lap. "There was a letter last week." She crossed to a desk and found the letter in the top drawer. She gave it to Villon, who extracted a piece of notepaper from the envelope. He read aloud, "'How do I kill thee? Let me count the ways.' Cute paraphrase of Browning."

"Oh, of course. The Brownings. Fredric March played Robert Browning opposite Norma Shearer in *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*." Then she said, "'Cute' is hardly the word I'd use to describe it."

"Beats me how these nut cases get private phone numbers," said Villon. "I know there are those in this town who make a heavy profit in private phone numbers and exclusive addresses, but it still beats me how they do it. This town never ceases to puzzle me. I've been on the force over thirty years . . ." he paused to give her a chance to comment on how young he looked, but Monica's mind was not involved with compliments at the moment, ". . . and I'm still astonished at how it comes up with fresh batches of kooks." The butler had entered with a fresh pot of coffee. "It wouldn't be a bad idea to hire a bodyguard. I can't offer you police protection because we're short-handed."

"I have two bodyguards," said Monica. "My butler is one of them. The other is my chauffeur, although mostly I prefer to drive myself." The butler left the fresh pot of coffee and discreetly withdrew.

"From the condition of his ears, I gather he was once in the ring."

"Yes. They didn't get that way from eavesdropping."

Villon had replaced the note in the envelope and asked, "Why didn't you bring this threat to your lawyer's attention?"

"Because I thought *that* was a practical joke."

"It's a very slim hope that we'll find any prints. Has anyone else seen it, handled it?"

"No one. I kept it to myself. I didn't even tell my half sister Cheryl. We're very close."

Half sister, thought Villon. He wondered which half. He asked Monica, "Have you ever heard the term 'erotomania'?"

"No, I haven't."

"It's a term we use for sickies who get a fix on a celebrity, pursue and annoy them, try to make advances, and when rebuffed, threaten to kill them. Are you familiar with any such person?"

"I get lots of adoring fan mail and gifts, things like that, but they're sent to the network, who have people who screen them. The note came to the house, as I'm sure you noticed."

"I noticed." Villon helped himself to coffee. "A lot of celebrities have been victimized by these erotomaniacs. Sharon Gless, Sly Stallone. Vanna White was stalked by a sickie named Roger Davis and we caught him. Victoria Principal went through hell, and of course John Lennon was murdered by one." Monica paled. "A young actress, Theresa Saldone, had her throat cut and she's fighting to keep her assailant in jail. And the saddest of all was a young actress named Rebecca Schaeffer who made the mistake of opening her door to a nut named Robert John Bardo. He killed her. I can list more, but I can see you're feeling a bit nauseous."

"I'm feeling a bit frightened."

"I'll put you somewhat at ease. Those that have attacked, rarely attack in public. Lennon was cut down as he entered his apartment house. Saldone and Schaeffer caught it in their doorways. Do you own a gun?" She told him about the snub-nosed revolver. "Do you know how to use it?"

"My chauffeur showed me how. He's an ex-marine. A Vietnam vet."

"If you get any more notes, any more messages, let me know at once." He handed her a card with his private number at the precinct and his home phone. Monica resisted an urge to kiss him while Villon was wishing she would.

And now, three weeks later, she was sitting on the opposite side of his desk. She had placed the dark glasses in her handbag while Villon gently scolded her for driving to the precinct unaccompanied. She explained about her lunch date with Cheryl and that she needed the chauffeur to run some errands.

"Actually, I'm sorry to tell you, there's no cause for alarm. The nut case plans to murder you in your bedroom."

"What?"

Villon unfolded a crudely drawn diagram of the layout of her house. A red X marked the spot for her bedroom. "This person has been in your house if this diagram is at all accurate."

"I couldn't have drawn it better myself. Herb, hundreds of people have been to my house. A couple of months ago I gave a huge party catered by the Deli Lama—Mahut Watoo and his slovenly wife and his son Yabu—and there were party crashers. Anybody could have drawn this diagram."

"Anybody did," said Villon, "and this anybody is dangerous."

"Oh my God, come to think of it . . ."

Villon asked eagerly, "What?"

"I inherited the house from my mother, who gave lavish parties. She was very wealthy. She always wanted me to have the house because, well, Cheryl was always mean to me when I was a child. She left Cheryl a good sum of money, but she lost it all."

"Bad investments?"

"Bad husbands. Mother left me the house and all its contents."

"Were those valuable paintings I noticed bought by yourself with the millions you've earned from television or inherited?"

"Mostly inherited. I really haven't an eye for art. Cheryl does." She sighed. "If she outlives me, she'll have it all. I have no one else. I've no children. I never married. I don't think I ever will. I'm too obsessed with acting." Villon refrained from commenting that he'd caught her show a few times and she wasn't obsessed enough. "I'm going to ask Cheryl to come live with me. She's got a dispossession notice, and although I promised to shore up her bank account, I'll feel better if she's in the house with me. Safety in numbers and all that."

"I've asked the Bel Air police to keep a special eye on you. I know the area is heavily patrolled, but a little extra won't do any harm. You going home from here? I'll walk you to your car. Drive directly home. Park in front of your door. The chauffeur can garage it later. I'll phone cauliflower-ears to be at the front door and watch out for you." Then he added, "You got the gun with you?"

She patted her handbag. "Herbie is right here."

"You call the gun Herbie?"

"Yes. Don't you like it?"

Cheryl accepted Monica's invitation with surprising alacrity. They had been children together in that house and now it would be like old times again, except Monica no longer did her hair in braids, and the goldfish tank had long been disposed of. Monica advised the butler and the chauffeur that Cheryl was to be kept innocent of the threats on Monica's life. "My sister has a very delicate nature. She's an alcoholic and she does drugs and that's very time-consuming. Just see that she's comfortable and has whatever she wants within reason. We'll put her in the suite next to mine."

Within a week of living with Monica, Cheryl had become almost beatific. She cut back on her vices as Monica, true to her word, worked to help her sister make a comeback in show business. Cheryl began to slim down and her hair was refashioned and Monica had a new makeup designed for her that softened Cheryl's face and gave

it the same angelic glow as Monica's. Cheryl read for a small but significant part on *Murder, She Wrote* and after a suspenseful four days was told the part was hers. She and Monica celebrated with dinner at the Deli Lama, Mahut Watoo supplying a bottle of champagne. At the bar, Yabu marveled at how Cheryl had changed for the better, while his mother, in the kitchen stomping cockroaches, suspected her foolish son was harboring a sexual desire for Cheryl. Tonight, she promised herself, she would wipe the grime off the statue of Buddha's face and pray that he strike her son with a temporary impotence until the suspected infatuation was finished with.

On the drive back to the house, Monica and Cheryl duetted old favorites, though Monica wasn't pleased with Cheryl's suggestion of "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead You Rascal You."

Working late at his office, investigating the case of a scriptwriter suspected of murdering another writer who had accused him of plagiarism, Villon was distracted by the puzzle that had been worrying him for weeks. He made a note to phone Monica in the morning.

But he would never speak to Monica again. She was brutally stabbed to death in the garden behind the house. A hysterical Cheryl alerted the butler, who alerted the chauffeur, who called the police. When the news reached Villon, he let out a string of curses that echoed and reechoed through his office and the hallways of the station house. The butler had sent for Monica's doctor, who sedated Cheryl, and she was soon calm enough to tell Villon that after coming home, she and Monica were too keyed up to go to bed, so Cheryl suggested they have another drink in the garden as the night was so warm and beautiful. Cheryl had gone to her room to change into a housecoat while Monica fixed the drinks and carried them out to the garden, seeing no reason to disturb the butler. In the brief time that the women were separated, Monica was murdered. Villon studied the distraught half-sister, who now reminded him of one of the queens of *film noir*, Gloria Grahame, also deceased. Villon had Cheryl repeat her statement for a police stenographer while the police photographers took photos of Monica from every conceivable angle. The coroner muttered something about the brutality of Monica's wounds, and Villon asked Cheryl if she knew of the death threats against her sister.

"Death threats?" Cheryl seemed genuinely astonished. "She never told me about any death threats. Oh my God, if I had known. . . ." and a fresh waterfall of tears erupted.

* * *

It seemed as though the only celebrities missing from Monica's funeral were the British royal family. Michael Jackson and Elizabeth Taylor sent the most elaborate floral designs; her network's floral design was their logo with a simple message: "You'll Always Take Your Time Spot." Madonna sent an autographed album. Mahut Watoo, his wife Toma, and his son Yabu had a pew all to themselves, as it had been ages since Toma had last availed herself of a bathtub. Cheryl sat between "Shifty" Lamarr and Irving Gassner, who kept reassuring her that Monica's estate was all hers.

A few days later, it was headlined in all the newspapers that Cheryl would take Monica's role in the series. Herb Villon was very unhappy. He was unhappy because he was troubled. The least of his troubles, though it would always manifest itself to haunt him, was that he had never been to bed with Monica. What troubled him most was that from the moment Cheryl moved in with Monica, the death threats had ceased. And now it was rumored that Cheryl's latest romance was Yabu Watoo, the handsome and virile son of the owner of the Deli Lama. When Villon learned that for many weeks prior to Monica's murder, Cheryl used to spend a great deal of time at the Deli Lama bar being served a special Tibetan tea made from herbs that the police suspected were being illegally smuggled into the country for the private use of the Deli Lama, Villon had no intention of closing the books on Monica's death. No intention whatsoever.

One night, a party was held at the Deli Lama in honor of Cheryl's taking over the lead in the TV series *Betrayal*. Villon attended and spent his time there watching Cheryl and Yabu indiscreetly smooching in a booth while Yabu's mother disapproved, making nasty noises. Cheryl waved to Villon and indicated he should join her and Yabu in a toast. She confided to Villon that she and Yabu had marriage plans. "My lucky number is four. This is it. This is for real. Yabu is my one great love, and I know if Monica was sitting here with us, she'd heartily approve. She loved this place and she loved Yabu's family, even his smelly mother."

Yabu looked at Cheryl hungrily. Villon heard him murmur in her ear, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways," and with his fingers tingling, Villon made a mental note to get to know Yabu better.



a **NEW Sam Hawthorne** story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Master of the impossible crime, Dr. Sam Hawthorne has been entertaining readers with reminiscences of his early exploits as a physician-cum-detective in the New England village of Northmont since the first Dr. Hawthorne story appeared in this magazine in 1974. What follows has all the flavor of 1930s New England, with a spinster aunt, a house with strange goings-on—and a disappearing parlor . . .

THE PROBLEM OF THE PHANTOM PARLOR

by **EDWARD D. HOCH**

Now let me tell you (Dr. Sam Hawthorne began, barely waiting until his wife had filled the visitor's glass), it was a week like nothing I ever knew in Northmont. That week was the closest I ever came to believing in the supernatural. But I'd better start with Josephine Grady, the twelve-year-old girl who'd come up from Stamford to spend the last week in August with her Aunt Min before returning to school after Labor Day.

This was late summer of '37, not long after that business with the Leather Man,* and I was hoping for a little peace and quiet for a change. I wouldn't be getting it that week. Min Grady brought her niece into the office shortly before noon on Monday and that was the beginning of it. Josephine's medical problem was simple, and not uncommon for girls her age. My main problem was gaining her confidence and talking with her about things her mother should have told her already. "Didn't your Aunt Min talk to you?" I asked

*See "The Problem of the Leather Man" (EQMM, December, 1992).

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casually. Aunt Min, a solidly built woman in her late forties, was waiting in the outer office, so I kept my voice down.

"Oh, Aunt Min is sort of spooky sometimes," she confided, twisting the hem of her blue dress nervously. "That whole house is spooky. After last summer, I hated to come back again."

"What happened last summer?"

"Weird things. She finally told me the house was haunted. I begged Mom not to send me back this year, but she said it was all my imagination. She said a week with Aunt Min wouldn't kill me, but look at me now!"

I had to chuckle a bit at that. "Josephine—is that what your friends call you, Josephine?"

"Well, Josie."

"Josie, this would have happened whether you were here or at home. It's part of growing up. Now tell me about the weird things at the house. It's a lovely old mansion, really, and I never thought of it as being weird."

She looked down at her bare knees. "My grandfather died there."

"That was long ago, back after the war. Lots of old people die at home. From what I hear, he'd been sick for years. But he built a beautiful house."

"It's got a ghost room," she said suddenly, blurting it out. "And sometimes there are sounds in the night when I'm trying to sleep."

"The wind and a little imagination can do wonders in the middle of the night," I tried to assure her. "I'll tell you what—how would it be if I looked in on you in a day or two, just to see how you're doing in your haunted house?"

She seemed to take heart in that. "Will you come tomorrow?"

I smiled. "All right, tomorrow afternoon. I have a call to make out that way, and I'll come to see you on the way back."

Min Grady was seated in the waiting room, and I delivered Josie into her hands. Min was an unmarried woman—still called a "maiden lady" in those quaint days—who wore cotton print house-dresses and carried a furled umbrella with her on all her visits into town. When I told her of my promise to stop by the house the following afternoon she frowned and asked, "This won't cost extra, will it?"

"No, no. It's included in my regular fee for an office call. It's just a follow-up."

That seemed to satisfy her. "Then we'll be expecting you tomorrow."

After she'd gone I stayed in the waiting room and sat down across from Mary Best's desk. Mary was my nurse and receptionist and confidant. There were days when I thought I was in love with her. "Can you imagine that poor girl? Neither her mother nor her aunt said a word to her. Min Grady just brought her to me instead."

"It's a small town, Sam. It always will be. You've lived here long enough to know that."

"Josie's at a very impressionable age. You often read of hauntings and psychic phenomena involving a child of her age."

"You don't believe in such things, do you?"

"Of course not. But the girl may need help."

"You're not the one to give it if she does," Mary pointed out. "You heal the body, not the mind."

"I'll just stop by the house. It'll be an excuse to see it, if nothing else. I've never been inside."

"That big old place always reminds me of a castle."

"Actually it's not as old as it looks. Min Grady's father built it in nineteen ten, just twenty-seven years ago. From what I've heard, it was a really tragic story. Carson Grady was a railroad baron, worth millions by the time he turned fifty. He and his family chose to settle here in Northmont, and he planned this house like an English country home. But they'd barely dug the foundation when Grady was terribly injured in a train wreck on his line out in Iowa. He lived, but was completely paralyzed from the neck down. In due time, the house was finished and the family moved in, but Carson Grady never left his bed for the rest of his life. Of course his every need was tended to, and his wife and two daughters remained with him until his death in nineteen twenty-one. Josephine's mother moved away then and married a man named Scarcross—"

"But she uses the Grady name," Mary pointed out.

"I'm not clear what happened to Scarcross. He either died or abandoned them. Anyway, Josephine's mother reverted to her maiden name. It was a money name, and still is. Min Grady remained here with her mother, who died a few years later. The house has been Min's ever since. I suppose she and her sister received the bulk of the estate."

"Does the house have a reputation for being haunted?"

"Not that I've ever heard. I think it's something Min Grady made up to add excitement to Josie's stay."

"It seems to have done that."

* * *

I reached the Grady house around three on Tuesday afternoon. The house itself was stone, with a wooden garage and toolshed in back. It was a sunny summer day and I could see Josie walking alone across the big side lawn. A gardener was working among the rose-bushes, cutting back some dead blossoms.

"Hello there!" I called to her, getting out of the car. I left my black bag on the seat, knowing I wouldn't be needing it.

"I thought you were never coming!" she exclaimed as she came to meet me. "It's after three."

"I had another stop to make first. How are we feeling today?"

"Better," she admitted. "Come on in the house."

The three-story stone building had a wide porch stretched across the entire facade. There were a half-dozen rocking chairs lined up here, and one with a small table beside it might have been Min Grady's favorite. On the table rested an open pack of cigarettes and an ashtray, together with a copy of Margaret Mitchell's popular novel *Gone With the Wind*.

"Hello, Dr. Hawthorne," Min Grady said, opening the screen door to come out and greet me. Her dress was a bit better than the one she'd worn to my office, and I could see she was wearing some makeup. I wondered if this was for my benefit or if some other visitor was expected.

"Good afternoon, Miss Grady. Are you enjoying the book?"

"Yes, indeed, though it's quite long. I hope to finish it by Labor Day." She dropped her voice a bit. "There was really no need for you to come. My niece is fine today."

"I just thought I'd look in."

"Let me get you some lemonade. It's very refreshing on a warm day like this."

Though she hadn't actually invited me inside, Josie ran onto the porch and held open the screen door. I took this as a sort of invitation and followed Min into the big house. The inside seemed to be decorated much as it must have been at the time it was built. Heavily brocaded drapes framed the windows, and the furniture had a massive turn-of-the-century look to it. After the darkness of the front part of the house, it was almost a treat when Min Grady led me down a wide hall past closed double doors and into a larger room with a great semicircular window that looked out on the rolling hills beyond the back lawn. A single giant oak towered above all the others, standing guard as it might have done fifty years earlier, long before the house was built.

"We call it the guardian oak," Min said as if reading my thoughts. "It was one of the reasons my father chose this spot to build the house. And this is the recital room."

The room was large and airy, obviously meant for entertaining, with a grand piano nestled in one corner. I could picture the power barons of New England gathered here, dressed in formal evening clothes, listening to a piano recital following a dinner of several courses. Apparently it had never happened. Carson Grady's dream had died in that train wreck.

She showed me the dining room and the large kitchen, then took me upstairs to the great master bedroom where her father had lived and died. "This is my room now," she said simply. It overlooked the front of the house, commanding a view of approaching cars.

"Was he able to sit in a wheelchair?" I asked, more from a clinical interest than for any other reason.

"No. He was in his bed until the day he died. Sometimes it took my mother and the nurse and my sister and me to make the bed with him in it. It was a hospital-type bed and I suppose he was reasonably comfortable, but it was a terrible way to spend the last eleven years of his life. Today perhaps some sort of surgery might have helped him. Back then there was no hope."

"Did he suffer from depression?"

"Not generally. We tried to keep his spirits up, and he made a pretense of running the railroad from his bed. Men would come to the house with all sorts of documents for him to study. I would read them to him, and he would dictate letters for me to send. Sometimes in the evening he would dictate notes for a journal, but he soon abandoned that. With the coming of the war, the visits to the house became less frequent. The railroad needed to be run by someone on the scene, in the office."

"Is it possible that Josie believes Carson Grady still haunts this house?"

"I don't know what's wrong with that girl at times. She was barely here when she was imagining all sorts of things."

Josie came up to join us and we changed the subject. She showed me her little room down at the end of the hall. "This was where my mother slept when she was a child. I wish I could see the oak from here."

After that we went downstairs again, and as soon as we were out of earshot the girl whispered, "Come here! I want to show you something."

I followed along as she led me to the closed double doors I'd noticed earlier, along the wide hall leading to the big recital room. She turned the knob and pulled the doors open. "Look at this!"

It was a large, elaborate china closet, its shelves filled with costly gilt-edged china that looked clean and shiny. "What lovely dishes!" I remarked.

"It's not always here, Doctor," she told me in a conspiratorial whisper. "Sometimes at night there's a little parlor here, with a sofa and chairs and pictures on the wall."

"I'm sure you imagined—"

"I *don't* imagine it! That's what she said too, when I asked her about it. I saw it last summer and again Sunday night. I can describe every piece of furniture in the room!"

"Sometimes the mind plays strange tricks. A dream can seem very real."

She closed the doors, obviously disgusted with me. "This place is haunted! I think his ghost is in that room."

"Whose ghost?"

"My grandfather's."

I reached for one of my cards. "Look, here's my telephone number at home. If anything strange happens the rest of the week while you're here, phone me at home and I'll come at once. How's that?"

"You don't believe me, do you?"

I smiled down at her. "No, but I'm willing to be convinced."

On the way back to my car I encountered Min Grady talking with the gardener. He was a man in his forties named Bill Herkimer who did odd jobs around town. I hadn't realized he'd been working for Min. "How's my niece, Doctor?" she asked.

"Fine. I don't think she'll have any more trouble."

Herkimer removed a toothpick from between his lips. "She's a cute little girl. The place brightens right up when she comes to visit."

Josie's aunt walked back toward the big house and I lingered with the gardener. "Ever do any work inside the house, Bill?" I asked casually. "It's a great-looking place."

"The grounds keep me busy enough in the summer. She's got close to thirty acres."

"Do you live here?"

"No, I just come out three days a week. I still try to keep up some of my other customers."

"Good seeing you again, Bill," I said as I continued back to my car. He nodded and returned to the roses.

I thought little about Min Grady and her niece on Wednesday. It was an unusually busy day for me, with some hospital calls and a couple of new patients. When I got home that evening the last thing I wanted to hear was the ringing of the telephone.

I picked it up and heard Josephine Grady's terrified voice. "Doctor, come quick! Something's happened to Aunt Min! I think she's dead!"

"Hold on, Josie. Try to talk slower. Are you at the house?"

"She's on the floor in that parlor I told you about! It's really there. She's got blood all over her head!"

"I'll be right out, Josie. Don't touch anything."

I paused only long enough to phone Sheriff Lens and repeat the conversation. "You'd better meet me out there, Sheriff. I don't think she's imagining it."

"I'll be there, Doc."

I reached the big Grady house just seconds before Sheriff Lens. He ran up to my car, puffing from the exertion, and we saw a white-faced Josephine Grady awaiting us in one of the porch rocking chairs. "Josie—"

"I was afraid to stay in the house after I called," she told us. Her hands were gripping the arms of the rocking chair and I could see she was on the verge of panic.

"Calm down now," I told her gently, unobtrusively feeling her pulse. "We're here. Everything will be all right. This is Sheriff Lens."

"Hello there, Josie. Suppose you wait out here with Doc while I take a look inside."

He opened the screen door and I could feel her starting to shake again. "I was upstairs and I heard a noise like a loud voice and the start of a scream. I ran into Aunt Min's bedroom but she wasn't there. Then I went downstairs and the double doors were standing open. It wasn't a china closet, it was a parlor like before, with dark red walls and heavy drapes over the window. Aunt Min was on the floor, all bloody, right in front of the sofa with its chintz covering and red tassels. I screamed and ran out to call you. I didn't know what else to do!"

"Everything will be all—"

Sheriff Lens appeared in the doorway. "Doc, can you look in here? I need an official declaration of death."

"I'm coming, too," Josephine said. "I'll be all right."

I kept her behind me as we entered, trying to shield her eyes from the sight that had already terrified her. Min Grady was sprawled across the hall floor, just outside the closed double doors. It appeared she'd suffered a blow to the head, with a fair amount of bleeding. I knew before I knelt down beside her that she was dead.

"That's not where she was!" Josie gasped behind me. "She was in the parlor!"

Before I could stop her she ran around me and yanked open the big double doors. Behind them was the china cabinet, looking exactly as it had the previous day. Josie fell fainting to the floor before I could grab her.

Josie's mother, Katherine Grady, arrived by car the following morning. I'd phoned her in Stamford the previous night and she'd made the ninety-minute drive shortly after dawn. She seemed slightly younger than Min, with blond hair and a slim figure. We'd arranged for Josie to stay with Sheriff Lens and his wife overnight, and when I met her at the Grady house her daughter and the sheriff had not yet arrived.

"Tell me what happened," she pleaded. "I could barely believe your call last night."

"I was sorry to phone you so late, Mrs. Scarcross—"

"It's Grady. I use my maiden name. But please call me Kate." She glanced up at the house. "We were always Min and Kate."

"—but when I called earlier your line was busy."

"I was on the phone all evening with teachers at my daughter's school. I'm president of our Parent-Teacher Association and school opens next week."

"It must be difficult, raising Josie without her father."

She gave me a smile. "We manage. Josie is a fine girl."

"A young woman now. Your sister brought her to see me Monday, before this terrible tragedy."

Kate nodded. "Josie phoned me Monday night and told me about it."

"Did she tell you about this phantom room, too?"

The woman hesitated. "Yes, she did. Josie has always been very imaginative."

"It might be just a phase she's going through, but obviously it's upset her a great deal. The killing of her aunt, coupled with these fantasies of hers, could have a lasting effect."

"I think I know the origin of this story of the phantom parlor. When she was younger—"

At that moment Sheriff Lens drove up with Josie in the car with him. She jumped out as soon as he'd stopped and ran to her mother's arms. "It was terrible," the girl sobbed. "Aunt Min was dead in that awful room!"

"There, there, darling. Everything will be all right."

"But the room is gone again and nobody believes me!"

We went inside then and walked through the main floor. The bloodstain was still on the hall carpet and when we opened the double doors the china closet was still on view. Sheriff Lens tapped the wooden sides and back inconclusively, searching for a secret panel, but found nothing. We continued on into the large recital room with its lovely view of the guardian oak.

"I hate to relive the painful moment for you, Josie," Sheriff Lens began, "but you must tell us again about finding the body. You must describe this room for us. How large was it?"

She thought for a moment, holding tight to her mother's arm. "I think it was about twice as long as me, lying down."

"Nine or ten feet?"

"Maybe. And sort of square, but probably deeper than it was wide. About seven feet by nine feet? I'm really not certain."

"What about the furnishings?"

"Well, I think I told you about the sofa with its red tassels. The walls were red too, but a darker red, and the closed drapes over the window were dark too. There were two chairs and they were more brown."

"What about the floor?"

"There was a bright oriental rug. And one lamp, but it was very dim. It stood next to the sofa."

"It doesn't sound like a very inviting room," I commented.

"Oh, it wasn't. It was scary!"

"How many times have you seen it, all together?"

"There were two times last summer. And then I saw it Sunday night after I got here. And last night when I found Aunt Min's body."

"Did you ever ask your aunt about it?" her mother wanted to know.

"The first time she just denied it was there. She showed me the china closet and said I must have imagined the little parlor. But I knew I didn't."

Kate Grady just shook her head. "I can't understand any of it."

Sheriff Lens cleared his throat. "As the next of kin I'm afraid I'll need to have you formally identify the body, Miz Grady. And the undertaker will need a dress to bury her in."

Kate Grady nodded. "I'll go up now and pick one out. Josie, was your aunt still sleeping in the big bedroom?"

The girl nodded. "I'll go with you," she said, as if not wanting to leave her mother's side.

Sheriff Lens sighed. "What do you think, Doc? Is it just a child with an overactive imagination, or is the place haunted?"

"I don't know. But I doubt if it was a ghost that killed Min Grady."

I drove back to my office in one wing of Pilgrim Memorial Hospital. At that time Northmont had no regular coroner and autopsies were assigned to whichever resident happened to be free. Lincoln Jones, our only black physician, had drawn this one. I found him in his office and asked about Min Grady.

"A blunt instrument, Sam. Something fairly heavy, like a candlestick or even a hammer. It was only one blow, but a hard one." He took an envelope out of his desk. "I thought you and the sheriff might be interested in this. It was clutched in her left hand, as if she grabbed it as she fell."

I stared down at the red tassel in the envelope, remembering Josie's description of the tasseled sofa in the room that didn't exist.

Later that day, when I returned to the Grady house, Kate and her daughter were going through the clothes in Min's bedroom. "This is a hopeless task," Kate admitted. "With all the things in this house it'll take a month to clean it out."

"The body's been released to the undertaker," I told her. "You can go ahead with the funeral arrangements now."

She nodded. "I'd like to have her laid out tomorrow, Saturday, and Sunday, with the funeral Labor Day morning."

"I'm sure that can be arranged."

Josie came in from the hall. "We need a key for that storeroom."

Her mother nodded. "It's probably here someplace. Help me with these bedclothes. We'll take them down to the basement for washing."

I decided it was a good thing to keep Josie busy, taking her mind off the shock of finding the body. When I was alone with Kate Grady I asked, "Do you know anything about this room your daughter described? You started to tell me something earlier."

"It was about the story." She gazed out the bedroom window at the road, remembering her father. "Even after he was confined to this room, he was always a good and kind man. When he was growing up, he once met a woman named Madeline Yale Wynne, whose father invented the Yale lock. She had a minor writing career and my father became fascinated with one of her stories that appeared in *Harper's* magazine. It was called 'The Little Room,' and dealt with a girl visiting her aunts at a New England farmhouse. She remembered a little room where she had played, but when she went back years later the little room had vanished, replaced by a shallow china closet, and the aunts denied it had ever existed. Years later, when the woman visited again with her own daughter, she found the little room was back and the aunts denied the existence of the china closet. After her mother's death the daughter returned to the house, and the china closet was there. She felt she must somehow learn the truth, and asked two close friends to visit the place together. But they became separated and on their individual visits one found a little room while the other found a china closet. Finally they determined to return to the house together." She paused.

"And what did they find?" I urged.

"The house had burned to the ground during the night. That was the end of the story."

"And you told this story to Josephine?"

"My father told it to me many times, and in later years I repeated it to her. In her imagination the little room of fantasy became this phantom parlor. The china closet downstairs has always existed, but her visits to her aunt became like those in the story."

I put my hand in my pocket and fingered the red tassel. "Do you mind if I look around outside?"

"Not at all."

I went out the front door and walked around to the rear of the house. There was only one large window there, the magnificent half-circle in the big downstairs recital room. Next to it, where Josie's parlor should have been, the stones of the wall were unbroken.

"Lookin' over the house?" a nearby voice asked.

I turned and saw Bill Herkimer, the gardener, walking toward me. "Hello, Bill. I didn't know you were working today."

"I'm not. Just came by to pick up my tools. Won't be any more work for me here now that Min Grady's dead."

"It was a terrible thing. Any idea who might have killed her?"

Herkimer shrugged. "A hobo, probably, looking for food. They come off the freight trains down at the junction."

"I know." I'd always suspected that Herkimer himself came to Northmont last summer by exactly that route.

"How's the girl taking it?"

"Josie? She found the body, which was quite a shock. I think she'll be all right, though." I started to turn away and then asked, "Bill, you've been in the house, haven't you?"

"A few times," he admitted.

"Were you ever in the little parlor on the main floor? The one with the red walls and the tasseled sofa?"

"Can't say that I was. Don't remember it, anyhow."

"Thanks anyway." I had a final thought. "You might ask Kate Grady, Min's sister, if she wants you to keep on working through the rest of the summer."

"Don't think I will," he decided. "Never met the woman."

"I could introduce you. She's inside now."

"Another time, maybe." He walked off across the back lawn, leaving me alone. I noticed he wasn't carrying any tools.

When I returned to the front of the house, Mrs. Russell from down the road had appeared with a wicker basket of fresh fruit for Kate and her daughter. They were standing in conversation on the big front porch and she waved when she saw me. "Hello, Dr. Hawthorne!"

"Good day, Mrs. Russell." She was a large jolly woman about Kate Grady's age, an infrequent patient of mine.

"Isn't this a shocking thing, what happened to poor Minnie? I won't feel safe in my house until the murderer is caught."

"None of us will," I assured her.

"To think that I was in this house talking to her just last Sunday!"

My interest stirred. "Did she ever have you into the parlor—the red room with the tasseled sofa?"

Mrs. Russell frowned. "I never saw any parlor like that. She always entertained visitors in that big room with the wonderful view."

After she'd gone I asked Kate Grady if I could examine the china closet again. "Of course," she told me. "Josie and I have work to do upstairs."

I opened the white double doors and stared grimly at the shelves of china. Then I went into the large room next door. I was busy tapping the wall adjoining the china closet when I realized that Josie

had slipped back downstairs to watch me. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Looking for secret panels."

"Are there any?"

"If I knew that, they wouldn't be secret."

"You believe me about the room, don't you?"

"There certainly is space for such a room, and it doesn't seem to be used for anything else. Are there any tools around? I need some sort of drill."

"Mr. Herkimer keeps a few tools in the basement."

I followed her down the cellar stairs, fearing he might have returned for them, but they were still there. I chose a drill and a small flashlight and went upstairs. Working together, we cleared the china from one of the shelves and I turned the crank to drill several small holes in the wooden backing. Then I put my eye to one of them and shined the flashlight through the others.

If I'd expected to find the phantom parlor, I was in for a disappointment. The flashlight's beam revealed only a big windowless space with cobwebs draped from the rafters and walls.

"What's this?" Kate Grady asked from behind me. "What are you doing in the china closet?"

"I'm sorry. I should have asked permission. There seems to be too much space unaccounted for, and I drilled some holes in the wood to see what was back there."

"It was to be my father's private study," she explained. "His smoking room. After the accident he decided there was no need for it, so it remained unfinished. My mother had a china closet installed in part of it."

"Did your father leave any blueprints or papers concerning the house?"

"There might be some things in the Northmont library. I believe Min gave them some papers after Mother died and I moved away and married. She was so furious about not meeting my husband or being invited to the wedding that she acted as if I'd abandoned the family. She told me I was cut off from the house and everything that had belonged to my father. I'd already received an inheritance, of course, but she said the house and all his belongings were hers. I was pregnant by then and I didn't fight her, though I resented her attitude. Father left a trust fund for his first grandchild, and that always upset her."

"And then your husband left you."

She gave a warning glance toward Josie, who'd drifted into the big room to gaze out the window but was still within earshot. "Mr. Scarcross did not want the responsibility of children," she said simply. "He was gone by the time she was born and he's never returned."

I took the red tassel from my pocket. It was time for her to see it. "Your sister was clutching this in her hand when she died."

The color drained from her face. "The parlor—"

"Yes, just as Josie described it. Is there any other tasseled red sofa in the house?"

"No." She took a deep breath. "If the parlor exists, does that mean my father—?"

"I don't believe in ghosts, Mrs. Grady. This house exists in the here and now, not in some parallel universe where it's still nineteen ten and your father is alive and well." I headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"I want to stop by the library before it closes."

The Northmont library occupied one wing of the courthouse, with a separate entrance onto the side street. Miss Isaacs, the elderly librarian who'd run the place during my entire fifteen-year residence in the town, was moving about the room with the help of her cane when I entered just before the six o'clock closing hour.

"Well, Dr. Hawthorne, this is an odd time for you to acquire a yen for reading."

"It's something special, Miss Isaacs."

"I'm just closing," she announced through thin lips.

"I understand that Min Grady donated her father's papers to this library some years back."

"Don't know why she did it," Miss Isaacs sniffed. "They were just personal papers from his years as an invalid. All the important things had already gone to Yale."

"Would it be possible to see what you have?"

"Tomorrow morning. We're closed now, Dr. Hawthorne."

"Miss Isaacs—"

She stared at me grimly. "The time is six o'clock. We're closed now."

There was no arguing with her.

In the morning I was back there at ten when she opened the door. If she was surprised at my persistence she gave no sign of it. "If I remember correctly, you wanted the Carson Grady papers."

"That's correct, Miss Isaacs."

She brought me a large cardboard file. "This is everything. I told you there wasn't much."

I saw at once that there were no plans or drawings of the house. The file contained only unimportant letters and a journal he'd tried dictating to his daughters over the years. Even this seemed to have been a failure, with gaps of six months or longer not uncommon. Mostly it commented on the changing seasons. One entry, dated just after the end of the Great War, seemed typical: *My lovely daughter Kate is transcribing this as I lie on my sickbed. Finally the world is at peace and we can only hope that it will last. It is mid-November now and the trees are bare. I stare out the window at the great old guardian oak and even it is devoid of leaves. Winter is a depressing time for many people, but to someone confined to his bed, unable to move, summer can be even more depressing.*

"It was a hard life for him," I commented, closing the journal.

Miss Isaacs nodded, helping me put everything back in the cardboard file. "He used to come in here sometimes. After the accident I visited him out there just once, up in his room. I brought him some books and I know the family appreciated it."

"Thanks for your help," I told her. It wasn't her fault that I'd found nothing useful.

That afternoon I went to the funeral parlor. It seemed as if half the town was there, drawn perhaps by the violence of Min Grady's death rather than by any special fondness for her. Kate Grady stayed close to the casket, greeting each new arrival, but I noticed that Josephine drifted away. Sheriff Lens was there, of course, and I asked him how the investigation was going.

"Not very well, Doc," he admitted. "No sign of forced entry at the house, but she could have opened the door to her killer. People do it all the time."

"The missing room is what bothers me, Sheriff. If Josie is telling the truth, what happened to it? Is the place haunted?"

"And if she's not telling the truth?"

"I hate to even think about that."

Josie walked past us and went outside. I left the sheriff and followed her out, but she'd disappeared around the corner of the building toward the parking lot. I saw Bill Herkimer lingering nearby. "Hello, Bill. Going inside?"

"I—no, I don't think so. I came to pay my respects, but I'm not much at wakes. I like to remember people the way they were."

Josie came back then, having retrieved something from the car. "Hello, Mr. Herkimer."

He smiled broadly. "Hello, Josie. How are you today?"

"Okay," she answered with a shrug.

"Will you be going back with your mother after the funeral?"

"Sure. I can't stay here."

I turned to see Kate Grady sticking her head out the door, apparently seeking her daughter. She saw us talking and suddenly she came running down the steps and along the sidewalk, her face a study in fury. "Josie! Get back inside!"

"I just—"

"*Get back inside!* Do what you're told!"

I tried to calm her down. "Mrs. Grady, we were just talking. Josie wasn't here more than a minute. This is your sister's gardener, Bill Herkimer."

She turned on me then. "It's been twelve years but I'd still know him anywhere. This is Bill Scarcross, my ex-husband!"

I walked with him after that, just the two of us, threading our way between the cars and out to the highway where we started toward the town square a few blocks away. "What brought you to Northmont?" I asked.

"I don't know. I'd never seen the house or met Kate's sister. My own life was sort of a mess and this seemed a way to bring back happier times. I only came to look, but then I met her gardener in a bar one night. Min Grady's gardener. He told me he was moving out west because of his health. He'd developed an allergy to all those flowers. More important, he told me that Min's niece visited for a week each summer, and on some holidays, too. After all those years I wanted to see my daughter."

"So you applied for his job."

The man I now knew as Bill Scarcross nodded. "I had no great skill but I read books at the library. Soon Miss Grady was complimenting me on my gardening ability. And my daughter came to visit. A week with her, even at a distance, made it all worthwhile. Min had never met me, of course, and I managed to stay out of sight when Kate delivered her and picked her up. I saw Josie briefly at Easter and again this week. She seems to be turning into a young woman before my very eyes."

"She is that," I agreed. "Do you want to get back with Kate?"

He gave a snort. "You saw her just now. There's no chance of that! I left her and she'll never forgive me."

I took a deep breath. "I have to ask you this, Bill. Did you kill Min Grady?"

"Min? Of course not! Why should I ruin my only chance to see my daughter, even for one week a year?"

"You were at the house a lot. Did you ever see anyone else hanging around? Did you see or hear anything strange while you were inside?"

"I told you, I was only in there a few times. I kept some tools in the basement. Once I heard a strange noise, but big houses are always making noises, aren't they?"

"Your daughter mentioned noises, too. Was it a sort of howling, like someone imitating a ghost?"

He shook his head. "Nothing like that. It was more of a faint whining, and it didn't last long."

"An animal?"

"It could have been," he answered doubtfully.

"I have to go back for my car," I told him. "I'll see you later, Bill. Will you be at the funeral?"

"No need to stay away, now that she's seen me."

Sheriff Lens and his wife had invited Kate and Josie to their house for an early dinner before the calling hours resumed at the funeral parlor. It was a nice gesture and I was especially thankful, because I'd decided I needed another look at that china closet. There was still plenty of daylight left when I reached the house, and I parked the car around back, entering through the cellar door. It was easy to unlatch from outside, using only a stick, and I knew a killer could have done the same thing. I mounted the steps to the main floor, moving quietly, and then stopped dead.

One door of the china closet stood slightly ajar.

I moved down the hall, barely able to breathe, somehow knowing what I would find. I opened the door further and there was Josie's parlor. Red walls, heavy drapes over the window, sofa with red tassels—all just as she'd described it. I could even see the stain from Min's blood still on the oriental rug.

I stepped into the little room as if in a dream.

And then I heard her behind me, and turned to see the hammer in her hand.

"I left Josie with the sheriff and came home to do some cleaning up," Kate Grady said. "You should have stayed away."

"No, but I should have checked the garage for your car."

"So you found the phantom room at last."

I shook my head. "It's not a room. It's an elevator."

That was when she swung the hammer.

It was much later, after the evening visiting hours, before I finally got a chance to explain it all to Sheriff Lens. By that time Kate Grady was locked up and things were starting to settle down. "I never thought you'd hit a lady, Doc," he said with a trace of a smile.

"She was coming at me with a hammer, Sheriff. I didn't have much choice. I think you'll find it's the same weapon she used to kill her sister. It came from Bill's toolbox in the basement."

"You'd better start at the beginning, with this phantom parlor."

"I read something this morning at the library. It was a journal that Carson Grady tried to keep, dictating to his daughters from his sickbed. He mentioned looking out the window at the guardian oak, but the only window from which it could be seen is the big semicircle in the recital room on the main floor. Carson Grady's bedroom faced the front of the house. This baffled me at first, but then Bill Scarcross mentioned hearing a whining noise in the house once. Josie had heard some sort of noise too. I remembered that construction on the Grady house was just beginning when Carson Grady was in the train wreck that crippled him, and suddenly it was all clear to me. Grady had altered the plans of his house to include an elevator. Moreover, it was an elevator large enough to accommodate his hospital bed. Early elevators were often decorated to look like little rooms, with chairs and lamps. This one even had drapes covering an imaginary window. When it was running it made the noise that Scarcross and Josie heard, but a hole in the china closet revealed only the empty shaft."

"But Kate Grady wasn't even here the night her sister was killed, Doc."

"So we thought at the time. But her home is only ninety minutes away by car, and remember, her telephone line was busy for some time when I tried to call her that night. She'd simply left the phone off the hook while she was gone. I assume what brought her here was Josie's Monday night phone conversation, in which she told her mother about the phantom parlor. Kate knew about the elevator, of course. She'd lived in the house while growing up, and even took

dictation from her father while he enjoyed the view from the downstairs window. She knew also that Min kept the elevator a secret. Josie had no doubt mentioned seeing the mysterious parlor last summer as well, and when it happened again Kate must have realized it was deliberate. Min was trying to frighten the girl, perhaps even worse. Josie's share of her grandfather's inheritance was held in a trust fund, remember. If anything happened to her, I imagine that money would have gone to Kate and Min. She came up here Tuesday night to accuse Min of threatening her daughter, frightening her with that vanishing room. They argued and Kate accidentally killed her."

But Sheriff Lens shook his head. "She left her phone off the hook, Doc. Remember that. She was establishing an alibi, and that means premeditation. Min was unmarried, and with her dead the money and the house would probably go to Kate. If she was innocent she'd have told us about the elevator and the parlor right away."

"I suppose you're right," I agreed. "Kate went back there tonight to clean the blood from the elevator floor. In case it was discovered, she couldn't have evidence like that to back up her daughter's story."

"Someone must have known the elevator was there."

"Just Min and Kate and their dead parents. The workmen who built it probably weren't from town, and after twenty-five years they'd be dead or scattered by now. It was a secret the sisters had, all the time they were growing up—a secret linked to their father's helplessness. Each of them treasured it, perhaps for those moments when they'd been alone with Carson Grady in the little moving room."

"What about the china closet?"

"It was attached below the elevator, of course. It appeared behind those doors when the elevator rose to the second floor. When the elevator was on the first floor, the china closet was in the basement. Grady no doubt got the idea from that story by Madeline Yale Wynne that he was always recounting. Tonight Kate brought the elevator to the first floor so she could bring water from the kitchen to clean up the blood, and that's when I found it. She was hiding in the house when Josie found the body Tuesday night, and rolled it out of the elevator while her daughter was phoning for help. Then she slipped out the back and ran to where she'd hidden her car, for the drive back home."

Sheriff Lens stroked his chin. "Why didn't we notice the parlor when it was on the second floor?"

"There was mention of a locked storeroom on that floor, but we never connected it with the phantom parlor. The elevator buttons were well hidden, of course."

"What's going to happen to Josie now that her mother is in jail?"

I thought about it. "Well, she's just discovered a father who loves her very much. I think Bill Scarcross just might make a difference."

ON OUR COVER

There can scarcely be a mystery reader to whom Evan Hunter is not known under the pseudonym Ed McBain, for the McBain byline attaches to the longest running and most popular of all police procedural series, the 87th precinct novels and stories. Evan Hunter's first novel was published in 1954 and only two years later he introduced readers to the unforgettable characters of the 87th precinct: Steve Carella, Lt. Byrnes, Bert Kling, and many more. While Mr. Hunter cannot be credited with having "invented" the police procedural, he has experimented often and successfully with the form, so that, unlike many other series authors, who provide their readers with an expected and reassuring formula, he leaves the reader uncertain what the next novel will bring.

Although the 87th precinct stories have an extraordinary range in terms of subject matter, style, and presentation, Evan Hunter felt the need to launch a new series in 1978, again as Ed McBain. His Matthew Hope novels, featuring a Florida lawyer in cases given the titles of fairy tales (*Goldilocks*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, *Three Blind Mice* . . .) are among the most vivid of his creations, often penetrating deep into the psychology of the killer.

Evan Hunter has also authored more than a dozen mainstream novels and genre pieces under four other pseudonyms. As the demand for his novels has increased, the author's output of short fiction has decreased. He is, however, one of the true masters of the mystery short story, having been a prolific writer for the pulp magazines and a contributor to *EQMM* as early as 1960.

Our cover finds Evan Hunter disguised as one of New York's finest. We discovered during our photo session with him that he knows a great deal about real cops and how they work, not just those of his imagination. Mr. Hunter's latest novel is *Mary, Mary* (Warner Books, March 1993).

a **NEW** short story by

TIM HEALD

A satirist of the first order, Tim Heald is less concerned with the criminal element in his stories than he is with mapping the frailties of his less-than-heroic protagonists, as in the case of the sixsome portrayed in this story with a delicious touch of black humor . . .

A VACANCE EN CAMPAGNE

by **TIM HEALD**

—AUGUST 1—

I can't think what possessed Sally to agree to a holiday with Brian and Lulu. They're perfectly okay in Putney in small doses, but the idea of being holed-up with them in a barn in Brittany for two whole weeks is frankly unspeakable.

The ferry was bloody, but not made any easier by Brian's attitude. It doesn't help to bang on and on about it being "a Frog boat." We're all in the EC now and it *is* 1993 so we might as well muck in, and even though the fellows on the car deck were absolute swine, the food is a sight better than on those ghastly British boats. Entrecôte and frites. Crème brûlée. Very decent little Nuits Saint Georges. Café filtre and a large Armagnac. But Lulu just had to send her steak back because it was *pas bien cuit*. Brian put away an alarming quantity of Armagnac because, he said, it stopped him getting seasick. As the channel was flat as a mill pond this seemed a pretty feeble excuse.

Mercifully the boys were absent. We gave them enough cash to get a self-serve supper in the cafeteria along with the backpackers and the train passengers and the rest of the great unwashed. I think

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they spent most of it on the fruit machines. Richard came in at some unearthly hour and snored till I threw a shoe at him.

—AUGUST 1—

This is going to be a bloody nightmare unless Mum and Dad sort it. Gary's parents are pigs too. Actually his mum's not too bad but his dad's like weird. And if anything he's even more of a fascist than Dad. The way he was talking to the French was really really embarrassing.

Mum and Dad had their usual map-reading row getting to the ferry port and then Dad stalled on the car deck and this big French bloke in overalls started shouting and it was, well, funny, only Dad didn't think so and his ears went all pink like they do when he knows he's done something pathetic.

After we'd found the cabins they all wanted to go off to the posh restaurant only they didn't want us around which I don't mind because the food's all muck in there and Mum and Dad always get in a great thing about table manners and not eating with your fingers and chug-a-lugging and that so Gary and I played the machines which were, well, wicked. Then we had a frankfurter and some fries and met these French girls who'd been hitching round Angleterre and we had some drinks with them. Gary bought me some stuff called Pernod which is sort of like water only when you mix it with lemonade it goes all cloudy and tastes like Likorice Allsorts. Terrific kick. I got quite a high. In fact I didn't think I'd be able to find the cabin only Veronique didn't think my idea of sharing her sleeping bag on deck was a very good one, so she helped me find the cabin. Then just when I got to sleep Dad started shouting and throwing things. Still Gary and I have got our own room at this "jeet" thing. Gary's dad Brian keeps going on about the "jeet" but I don't think he knows what it is any more than anyone else. Gary says it's all been fixed up with some bloke they met in Putney whose dad is a French count.

—AUGUST 2—

Some bloody gîte! Why in God's name we couldn't have fixed it through Chris at Vacances en Campagne like we usually do I cannot

think. I mean, what can one expect of someone at a party in Putney who claims to be some sort of French aristo? He was pure Maurice Chevalier *atte* Bow. Probably born under the family barrow in the Old Kent Road! It's not as if it's cheap either—in fact it's outrageously expensive. And everything's extra. You get charged for the electricity—what there is of it—and the Calor gas, and the wood for the “open” fires (actually they're more like “closed” fires because it's quite obvious that the chimneys haven't been swept since the Revolution). There's no phone, so he can't charge for that. Even the water's on a meter and the bed linen is ten francs a pillowcase and twenty a sheet. Brian and Lulu, naturally, are putting a brave face on it. No more talk about “bloody Frogs,” just endless, “Oh, isn't it charming?” and “It's so enchantingly typical,” and—worst of all, “Not like home, eh, Gordon?” I could have belted him when he said that. I could have done him a serious mischief. Still, even though she is a silly cow, you can't help fancying Lulu. For a woman of her age she's got terrific legs.

Oh Jesus, where to begin?!

First of all, the house is in the middle of absolutely nothing and miles from nowhere. The nearest village is a place called Treguerpoul-le-Grand. I'd like to know what Treguerpoul-le-Petit is like. Le Grand has a “Bar des Sports” with a pool table and a handful of chaps in blue overalls puffing away on filthy unfiltered cigarettes and drinking cider out of mugs. Then there's a village shop which is run by an old bag with one tooth. It sells gumboots, chocolate biscuits, and gallon containers of *vin ordinaire*. There was a “crêperie” but that's closed for summer. The church has a steeple with holes in it. Apparently this is to stop it being blown over by the prevailing gale—though at the moment there is no wind at all, just a light drizzle and a thin blanket of fog. T-le-Grand is about a kilometre away if you walk over the artichoke fields, but by car it's about five. The “gîte,” as Brian and Lulu will keep calling it, is entirely surrounded by artichokes. “Well, we won't starve,” said Brian. “Ho ho ho.” I had never noticed before how Brian signals his jokes with this thigh-slapping “ho ho ho” as if he were one of the seven dwarves.

Anyway, Brian's “gîte.” Barn is putting it kindly. Yes, it's true there are three double bedrooms in the sense that there are three bedrooms into which it is possible to insert two average-sized human beings. And if you don't mind sleeping on horsehair, there is not a lot wrong with the beds. Provided you get on all right with your

partner and go easy on the garlic. The bathroom has a bidet but no bath—only a shower that has two temperatures: scalding or freezing.

The living room is at least big, but it leaks and there are drafts everywhere. Some musty old prints on the walls, exposed beams, threadbare rugs on the floor. There are mice, too. The armchairs are uncomfortable, and the dining table wobbles even when you stick folded newspaper under the legs. The kitchen has a fridge with mould in the ice compartment—which doesn't freeze—and a stove with a one-speed oven. There is one frying pan, two saucepans, and a job lot of spoons, knives, and forks, and the whole thing smells of gas.

Thank God we stocked up on duty free. At least a few stiff scotches kept out the worst of the damp and cold. Sally and Lulu cooked spaghetti with a tinned Bolognese sauce which we'd brought with us. There were, naturally, no shops open apart from the one in T-le-Grand, which is effectively useless unless you want roast gumboot. Christ, Gary's table manners are dreadful—even worse than Richard's. He seems completely unable to keep his mouth shut while eating. He and Richard went out after supper while we played bridge. God knows what they got up to. They didn't get back till after we'd gone to bed. We should have left them at home or sent them to some kind of summer camp. Borstal preferably. I never realised what a constant provocation teenage boys could be.

—AUGUST 2—

I hate old people. If anything Gary's old people are worse than my old people but there's not much to choose between them. Luckily we were able to escape after supper. Mum and Gary's mum did a spag bol which was like, well, revolting only none of them seemed to notice. They'd bought some massive bottles of booze on the boat so they were all too pissed to taste anything. They're horrible when they're drunk. All laughing at each other's feeble jokes all the time. I think Dad fancies Gary's mum. He's always eyeing her up.

Gary and me played pool in the village. Gary has a torch so we made it through the fields. I think I like Pernod. Also we bought some Gauloise cigarettes which are, well, smoky.

When we got back they were all snoring and the walls are so thin the whole jeet shakes.

—AUGUST 3—

To the seaside at Perros-Guirec. A sort of Bognor-sur-mer. They have Scrabble tournaments every Monday and when we arrived there were a whole lot of people in track suits prancing about on exercise mats under the leadership of a rather fanciable gamine brunette. Brian and I swam briefly before the fog rolled in; the girls found a cafe and drank kirs; and bloody Gary and Richard buggered off and did God knows what in the casino. I slipped Richard a fifty-franc note, which was worth it just to get them out of our hair. Lunched on langoustes and Muscadet, then a supermarché shop, back to base, slurped some duty free, supper, bridge, and bed. Could be worse I suppose. The boys sloped off after the evening meal griping about not having anything to do, not having enough cash, etc. etc. I told them they were extremely privileged to be enjoying the sort of holiday most of their friends would give their eyeteeth for. They didn't seem convinced.

—AUGUST 3—

Christ, another twelve days of this. We went to the seaside which was just like the seaside in England except there were all these French people hitting balls at each other on the beach. Sort of Ping-Pong without a table or a net. Dad and Gary's dad ogled some middle-aged women wobbling about in time to continental house music—not very heavy metal. Mum and Lulu went off to start getting pissed—which is all the oldies seem to think about—and Dad and Brian went swimming which was pretty pathetic. They've both got dreadful beer bellies but they strutted down the beach sucking their breath in and sticking their chests out and trying to look like they were, well, smart but they just looked white and pathetic and English and old. I hope I never look like that.

The evenings are really dreadful. The jeet is cold and miserable and they just sit about talking crap and then they have supper and then they play cards and the only time they like notice us is to complain about what we're wearing or what we're doing or not doing. Like "Why don't you read a good book?" or "Why don't you go for a walk?"

Tomorrow night Gary and me are going to cook supper. We might slip in some really poisonous berries. One of the old blokes in the bar tried chatting us up which was a bit spooky. Good pool table though and I do like Pernod. When we got back they'd left one of the burners on in the kitchen. Dad had made Breton coffee—Nescafe and calvados which is some sort of apple brandy. Also they'd left some money lying around on the sideboard. Not much but we nicked it anyway. Hope they won't notice.

—AUGUST 4—

Rained again. Sally and Brian both said they were feeling a bit hung over, so they stayed home while Lulu and I drove in to do a shop in Treguier. We took the boys and dumped them outside the cathedral. For once they didn't ask us for money. After the shopping we adjourned to the bar at the Hotel Estuaire and sank a couple of beers. I must say Lulu *has* got bloody good legs, and actually once she's away from Brian she's not nearly as insular and stupid as I'd thought.

Brian and Sally seemed a bit peeved that we were so late getting back. Actually we weren't that late and anyhow I blamed it on the boys. At least they have *some* uses.

We've practically finished the duty free but we bought some calvados (excellent) and some Breton whisky (doubtful) at the supermarché. Richard and Gary cooked supper, which, I have to admit, wasn't too bad. They did a spaghetti carbonara which was really bacon and scrambled egg with pasta, but it was properly cooked, which you can't always say about the girls' offerings. Afterwards, however, we tried teaching them how to play bridge. Not a success. Gary swore, unforgiveably, at his father. Actually, I was inclined to side with the boy. Brian had taken far too much of the Breton whisky and it's just not practical to order a sixteen-year-old to go to his room. The pair of them buggered off out and didn't come in till the small hours. God knows where they'd been, but for once I'm not sticking my head above the parapet.

Incidentally, I made some Breton coffee with some of the whisky when we'd finished the bridge but everybody dozed off before I'd finished. So I'm afraid I slurped the lot—and then nodded off myself. I only woke when the boys came in, by which time the others seemed to have gone to bed. Maddening. Naturally I pretended I'd stayed

up late reading, had a long day, just nodded off for a second or two, but I could see the little beasts smirking. I shall have to talk to the others about their coming in so late. We really can't have them lager-louting round the French countryside at all hours of the night.

—AUGUST 4—

I hadn't realised old people were so like, well, pathetic really. All they want to do is play cards and get pissed and take it out on us. We found a wicked pool table in Treguier in the morning. Then in the evening after Gary and I cooked this brill carbonara they decided they'd teach us to play cards. Honestly, it was so boring and then Gary did something he shouldn't have done with his ace of clubs—I think—and his dad got, well, mad and started having a right go at him and told him to go to his room as if he was a baby so Gary was, well, gutted and told his dad to get stuffed and his dad was an amazing colour and his eyes all sort of shrunk and piggy and Gary's mum looked as if she was going to start blubbing and Mum and Dad just looked at their cards and pretended nothing was happening.

So we went out and instead of going to the village we went to the end of the road and managed to hitch a lift into Treguier and went and played pool in this bar and hung around and there were some French kids who spoke a bit of English and it was quite nice really and one of them had this really beaten-up sort of van and he gave us a lift almost all the way home and when we got in there was this terrible smell of gas because they'd forgotten to turn the stove off and Dad was asleep on the sofa and snoring so we woke him up only he was really too smashed to know what was going on.

—AUGUST 5—

Richard asked for money again. I don't know what to do about him and his bloody money. He spends it like water and seems to think it grows on trees. We compromised in the end and I gave him half what he'd asked for. It's not as if he does anything to earn it. Neither of them even make their beds and their room's like a pigsty. More rain and fog. An interesting tête-à-tête with Lulu when Sally and Brian went to investigate the architectural pleasures of the local château. I get the distinct impression that all is not as well as

it might be between her and Brian. The boys disappeared around lunchtime and didn't get back till about midnight. Brian and I agree that we must have serious words with them both. We should never have brought them.

—AUGUST 5—

I don't know why Gary and I have to have parents as naff and disgusting as ours. You'd think they'd be glad to pay us to keep out of their way and get drunk and have it off with each other—there's definitely something funny going on between Dad and Gary's mum and if you ask me Mum and Gary's dad have sussed it and are going to pay them back by getting up to something themselves. If it wasn't so pathetic it would be, well, disgusting. Gary says it's like something out of Eldorado. Anyway we both asked for money and you'd think we'd asked for cocaine or snuff movies or something. Both dads were the same, like really really angry and lots of stuff about how all we ever did was complain about not having anything to do and going out and money money money. I mean if we were home I could get a job even if only a paper round but I can't see us getting a paper round in Treguerpoul-le-Grand. Gary says we could try and get work in the supermarché at Treguier but I don't think our French is up to it even if we were just humping boxes around. We certainly couldn't do the checkout. So I don't know what Dad's problem is. I didn't ask to come to Brittany with them, I'd much rather stay home, but now he's blaming me for everything—even the freezing fog.

Still we got another lift into Treguier and met Philippe and he's leant us like serious money—well 200 francs. We'll have to try and nick some from one of the old people's wallets. They always leave them lying around.

—AUGUST 6—

Sun. Absolute bliss. We went to the beach at Tregastel and lay in the sun and swam and had a heavenly assiette de fruits de mer in a bar overlooking the sea. Considering her age, Lulu looked bloody marvellous in her swimsuit—plain black, one piece. The boys scarpered, but who knows where or what they did. The main thing is

they weren't in our hair. We even bought a pair of those curious oversize Ping-Pong bats and balls. There doesn't seem to be any scoring system, but I have to say I'm a great deal better at it than Brian.

Picked up some tuna steaks in a pecherie plus stacks of Muscadet. The boys failed to make our rendezvous by the Grand Hotel, so after a while we went home. They're old enough to fend for themselves and they know where the gîte is. If they want to be independent then let them be independent.

—AUGUST 6—

God, parents are like, well, shitty! They were all in a terrific mood in the morning because the fog had gone and you could actually see the sky. Hello sky! Hello sun! Hello birds! Hello flowers! So we all went off to the beach again. You'd think we were in a tropical heat-wave the way the oldies were all carrying on, but actually it was still pretty freezing.

No way were we going to join in being silly like them so we went off and tried to find where it was like at and actually it wasn't that bad. We met these English kids and had a great time with them playing the machines in the casino and eating frites and glaces and complaining about parents. They all have the same problem. What is it with old people?

We got to our meeting place outside the Grand Hotel and they didn't show. We waited and waited but eventually we decided they'd given us up. Quelle horreur, comme on dit en France. So we went back to hanging out and having a good time, then like hitched back and walked the last mile or so through the artichokes. Got in at about 1 A.M. and they're all snoring fit to bust. Horrible smell of gas. Hardly dared have a fag in case we blew the whole place sky-high. So smoked in the garden.

—AUGUST 7—

Brian and I have had serious words with the boys. I explained very patiently in my view that going on holiday together was a team effort and that therefore everyone bloody well had to pull together, and if we, for example, made a rendezvous then the rendezvous had

to be kept, otherwise the whole shooting match collapses, no one knows where anyone is, the gendarmes have to be alerted, and it's all utter confusion.

Richard, needless to say, said, "But you didn't call the gendarmes, Dad. You didn't give a goddamn!" which caused Brian to lose his temper and shout, "Don't get smart with your father, sunshine. If you were my son I'd lay you across my knee and give you a right thrashing." Which was understandable but not altogether sensible. So I said, "I think perhaps you'd better leave this to me, Brian." Which seemed to make him even madder, though he didn't say anything coherent, just spluttered, though there was an almost understandable sentence which sounded suspiciously like, "If you spent less time chasing other men's wives and more time disciplining your offspring . . ."

I ignored this, of course.

"I wish you wouldn't swear," I said to Richard, and I did think he looked embarrassed. He's not a bad boy really. Just absolutely maddening. But maybe it's his age.

And that was about it really. Reading it through, I can see it looks rather weedy and wimpish but what was I supposed to do? I told the boys that they weren't helping, that, like it or not, we had another whole bloody week in Brittany and if they went on behaving in this ridiculous selfish way they would make life an absolute misery, and even if they didn't care about us they owed it to their mothers to behave in a less mean-spirited way and attempt to be a little more grown up. Gary, I'm sorry to say, said something to the effect that if being grown up was what we were doing, then he didn't ever want to grow up thank you very much, which made his father even more apoplectic. I thought he was going to have a cardiac arrest then.

Anyway, Richard said he had a proposal, which was that if we gave them enough money they would, as he put it, "stay out of our hair" until the end of the holiday. Brian said that was blackmail and Richard said that it wasn't blackmail it was a business proposition and I'm afraid I said, "How much?" And in the end I agreed. So did Brian, sort of, though he wasn't really capable of speech. It was more than we could really afford, but it seemed worth it, and off they went to God knows where.

Brian said I shouldn't have given in and he'd get even with the little bastards. I said something flippant about the one thing they weren't was little bastards. That didn't go down very well, and

Oh shit, I'm going to have a drink. I don't like writing this down. It's demeaning.

—AUGUST 7—

Well we finally had the big bust-up. Gary's dad is a complete jerk and real bully or he would be if he had the guts. He's like, well, violent except now we're big enough to smack him back he daren't do it. Gary says he used to hit him, well, hard with a leather belt and with hairbrushes. Anything he could get his hands on. He says he used to beat his mum sometimes too, especially when he'd had a few.

Dad on the other hand is just pathetic, a real wimp. I knew the one thing he didn't want was serious trouble, like he's frightened of a bad argument and scared of getting hurt and especially of upsetting Mum. Mum's much stronger than he is. In fact she completely dominates him. She's just sort of the one who wears the trousers and tells him to shut up when he says something stupid and pig-ignorant which is most of the time.

Anyway I screwed some money out of him by being like dead reasonable. Gary was going to make a big fight out of it because he's like his dad, sort of, well, violent. He can do a vicious head-butt.

So after we got the money we went down Treguier and met Philippe and some English kids in the "Irish Bar" which is this mean place with a pool table and a whole lot of Irish stuff like Irish flags and Pogues tapes and Guinness and Paddy whisky. It's all because they're like Celts or something and talk the same language. Don't ask me what it's all about but it's a great place to hang out and there were some kids from Cork who said there'd been this wicked accident on their campsite. This caravan like just blew up because there was something wrong with the gas cylinder. Apparently this bloke just went in to make himself a mug of Nescafe and he lit a match and the whole place went Poof! They said you could hear the explosion all over the campsite and there was a helicopter to take the bloke and his wife to the hospital in St. Brieuc. All the windows got blown out. Gary said it sounded like the sort of gas gear we have back at the jeet and he gave me a funny look and said, "Makes you think dunnit?"

—AUGUST 8—

Sun shone. To the beach. Dropped the boys, who said they'd be back around midnight. Swam. Muscadet and langoustines for lunch. Sunbathed. Played bridge. Cooked some magret de canard that I picked up at the market in Lannion. Peaches. Some gungy Livarot also from a farmer's stall in the marché.

If I say it myself I think we've sorted out our domestic troubles quite successfully. The boys didn't say much. In fact they didn't say anything at all. But at least they weren't rude or particularly hostile. Lulu was impressed with the way I handled things. She says Brian is so violent. She likes quiet, civilised people.

—AUGUST 8—

Well, hot day. Hung out. Philippe was impressed by the dosh. He wanted to know whether our parents were rich which Gary and I didn't really know how to deal with. I mean there's always enough. We're not exactly skint but if we were really rich we'd be down in the south of France in a smart hotel not freezing to death in a crummy jeet in Brittany. Even though it was hot today. Philippe seemed very interested that we didn't have brothers and sisters. He asks the oddest questions. He kept asking us if we hated our mums and dads or if we loved them or what. Gary and I both said we tried not to think about them if poss. I mean I don't think about it. Not really. I mean like they're Mum and Dad and you've just got to make the most of it haven't you. I mean put up with it.

He is a funny bloke Philippe. He wants to come and have a look at the jeet when the old people are out. Says it might be embarrassing if they were there. Which is right. I mean they wouldn't like Philippe on account of they're not into pigtails and tattoos. He's got one on his bum of this naked woman and a snake. It's dead rude.

—AUGUST 9—

This is more like it. Another fine day weatherwise. Food, drink, sea, sand, though alas no sex. Just as well there isn't much more of the holiday because I think both Lulu and I . . . well let's just say

that we've agreed to meet for a little lunch soon after we get back. I don't think Brian and Sally suspect anything. In fact they seem quite engrossed in each other, which is a relief. The boys slept here last night but that's about it. They go their way and we go ours.

—AUGUST 9—

We showed Philippe the jeet. He couldn't believe the rent we were paying. He thought it was a real ripoff. He said no self-respecting Frog would think of living in a place like it, especially not in the middle of an artichoke field.

He was, well, interested in the kitchen, and how they always cook an evening meal, then drink and play cards and then make coffee last thing at night. He said we ought to have supper at home tomorrow night and then if we did something clever with the gas cylinder it would be a really funny joke when Dad or whoever came to make the coffee later on. Nothing too bad he said, not like the thingy in the caravan because he said the jeet's so leaky and draughty it wouldn't be dangerous, not like in a trailer or caravan where everything is sealed tight. Gary thought it would be, well, funny and serve them right for being so shitty. I wasn't so sure but Gary and Philippe said not to be silly, no one would ever know we had anything to do with it, it would look like an accident. All we had to do was make sure the gas was leaking, well, good, then go down the bar and leave them to light up later.

—AUGUST 10—

Quelle drame! Another quiet day with the boys out of our hair, except that they asked if they could have supper with us for a change. I thought as they were behaving so relatively well, etc. etc., that it might be an opportunity to extend the proverbial olive branch and why didn't we all go out to supper together. Brian seemed a bit dubious, but the girls were all for it—they're very sensitive where the wretched offspring are concerned—so we all piled off to Treguier and had a thoroughly enjoyable blowout at L'Estuaire.

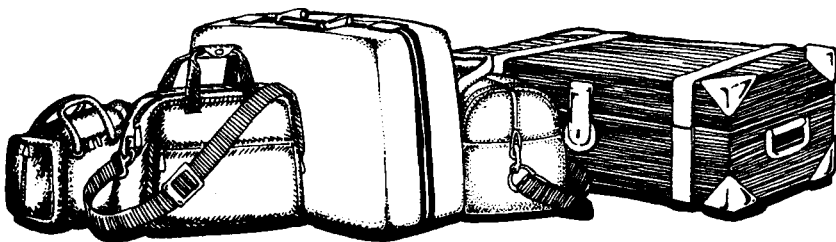
Then lo and behold we were just driving back down the drive all feeling rather jolly when there was a bloody great explosion from the gîte. Well of course we charged off and arrived to find the kitchen

completely wrecked and a bloke in jeans and a pigtail lying face down on the floor. Dead, I'm afraid. A burglar, I suppose. Presumably he struck a light so he could see, and the gas must have been left on and poof! Quelle palaver! Had to summon the gendarmes and God knows what. Oddly enough, the boys seemed much more upset than the rest of us. More sensitive than we thought perhaps.

—AUGUST 10—

Oh God, how could we have known Dad would take us all out to dinner. Philippe must have got worried because there was no light on. We did everything just as he'd said so it would have worked fine as soon as they put on the coffee (we would have been halfway to the bar by then). Only Philippe has to bloody come nosing in and set the thing off himself.

He really blew it.



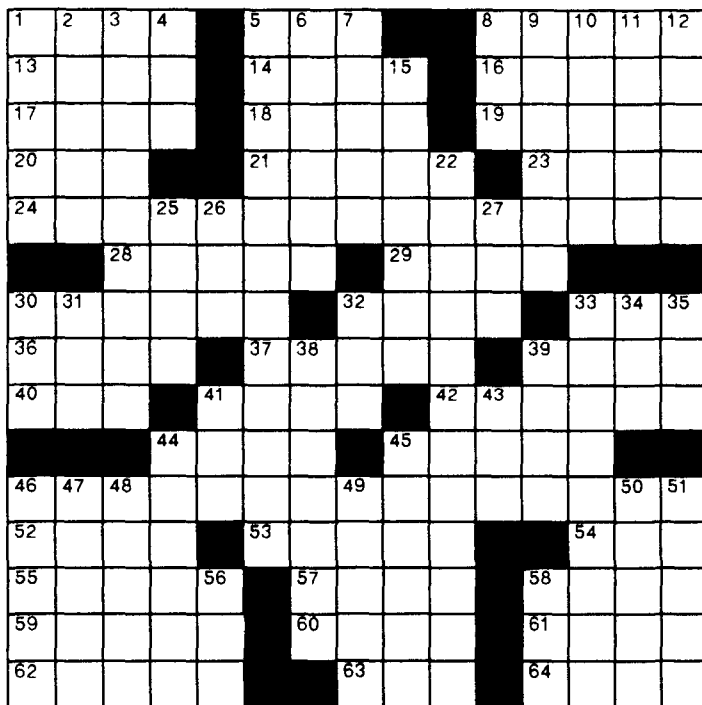
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THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

by Janet Lumiansky



Solution on page 70

ACROSS

- 1 Well turned out
- 5 Kind of company: Abbr.
- 8 London and New York areas
- 13 Gently sloped hill
- 14 Thailand, formerly
- 16 Plumber's tool
- 17 Eye
- 18 Quechuan
- 19 Played it over
- 20 Stoooge
- 21 Tones, Scot.

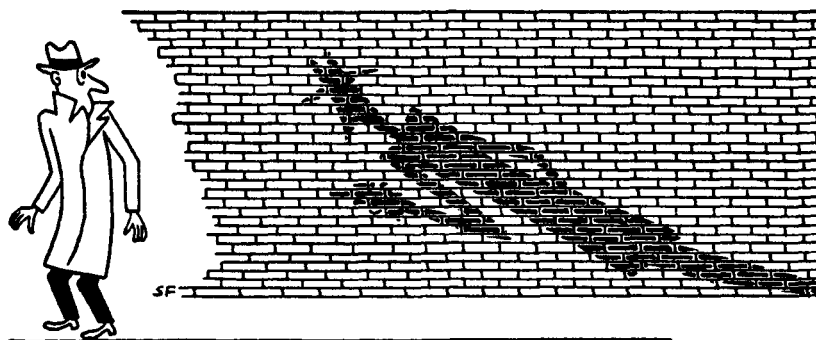
- 23 Reptiles
- 24 What Wolfe sometimes needs
- 28 What Wolfe does not suffer
- 29 Rat- _____
- 30 Furniture decoration
- 32 Redact
- 33 Greek letter
- 36 Brown
- 37 Relocates
- 39 Dry
- 40 Family member
- 41 Fifi's friend

42 Fine meal
 44 City on the Oka
 45 Pledges or challenges
 46 What Wolfe never sends
 52 Nobleman
 53 Agent of ferment
 54 Pepper or shrub
 55 Like a Finnish poem
 57 Fair: Abbr.
 58 Regretful Miss
 59 Got up
 60 Antelope's playmate
 61 Fast in Lourdes
 62 Wood turner
 63 Rocker Stone
 64 International org.

DOWN

1 Trounce
 2 Hardship
 3 Douglas is its capital
 4 Opposite of haw
 5 Wolfe's question to Archie
 6 Forty- —
 7 Tropical seed
 8 Russia, formerly
 9 Play type
 10 Abrasive

11 Giraffe's relative
 12 Faculty
 15 Not natural
 22 High praise from Wolfe to Archie
 25 Portal
 26 100 centavos in Peru
 27 Betray
 30 WWII org.
 31 Old auto
 32 First mother
 33 Rainbow-hued
 34 Airport code for Singapore
 35 Sweet girl
 38 Crop grown for lubricants
 39 Space
 41 100 square meters
 43 Kind of Sec'y.
 44 Having a wise look
 45 Good news
 46 Wild
 47 Song or movie
 48 Whether —
 49 Accuses
 50 Long-running Broadway musical
 51 Destroys
 56 Bee follower
 58 Egg indicator



An associate editor of a journal of short prose, Kelly Simon has had fiction published in several literary magazines and is currently at work on a collection of short stories she describes as “about the lighter side of degradation.” We can think of no better description of her story for us . . .

OBJECTS IN MIRROR

by KELLY SIMON

He's angry this morning. You know it by the way he flings the blankets back. Did something happen to set him off in the middle of the night? Did you hog the covers? Snore? Roll over onto his side of the bed? Think hard! You lie in bed listening to the hiss of the shower, the stays from your merry widow digging into your hip, scrolling your mind for what you might have done that rubbed him the wrong way. Maybe if you make him a nice breakfast he'll snap out of it.

You sprinkle chives on his omelet, butter his raisin toast.

“Good?” you say.

“Unnhh,” he grunts, scraping the chives to one side. He pushes the plate away, the omelet half-eaten.

Memo for tomorrow: No chives.

He goes into the living room and sits on the sofa. He doesn't seem ready to leave for work yet. The paper hasn't come, but that's not always a clue. Sometimes he reads it, sometimes he doesn't. You need to use the toilet, but you're afraid that when you come out of the bathroom he'll be standing outside the door waiting for you with that pained expression on his face.

Yesterday you drove him to work at 6:30 and picked him up at 5:05, the day before it was 7:15 and 4:10. The day before that, 7:45 and 5:40. You try to extrapolate when he's going to leave this morning, but there seems to be no pattern. Get your jacket out and set your purse nearby so when he's ready, you won't have to get them together at the last minute. And don't forget your keys! Sit there on the sofa and wait. Watch him, but don't make it obvious. He doesn't

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like to be watched. From the angle he's tilting it, it looks like there's still some coffee in his cup. He's picking up the TV remote, clicking it on. That means another few minutes at least. When he's ready to go, he'll lean forward and reach for his briefcase.

Bad guess. He's setting the cup down, starting to push himself off the sofa. Stand up now and reach for your jacket and purse. Now! Go get the remote and turn the TV off. *Don't forget the car keys.*

The paper plops outside the door.

"Paper," he says. "More coffee?" You sink back down.

He gets the paper from outside the door and carries it over to the sofa. He passes the supermarket ads to you and opens up the business section. Skimming, it should take him seven minutes. You check your watch. 7:08. You set the ads down, go into the kitchen, and pour another cup of coffee and as you come back into the room, you see him standing, his briefcase under one arm. You set the coffee down in a hurry, trying not to slosh it on the table, grab your jacket and your purse. The keys fall between two sofa pillows. You fumble for them, your heart slamming against your ribs. He's in the hall waiting for you, coffee cup, briefcase, and lunch bag in his hands, tapping his foot.

It takes four minutes and twenty-three seconds from the eleventh floor down to the parking garage. He's timed it. That's if all the elevator doors open and close instantly. Otherwise, it will take four minutes and forty-seven seconds and that puts him in a *really* foul mood. Here's the elevator. Push L for lobby. Remember L. Not P. You do it every day, dummy. Good. The elevator started right up. Now it's slowing down. Get ready. The doors are opening. Don't lag, stupid. *Move* before the doors are all the way open. He grabs you by your shoulder pad and yanks you back. You look up. It's floor 5. He's got that what-can-you-expect smile on his face. You get back in, try not to look embarrassed. Don't explain. Don't apologize. He'll just sigh.

The elevator doors open. Step out. Walk briskly across the lobby. Long strides. Push the button for the elevator that takes you down to parking level. The elevator doors open. Press the Down button, but which? You've gone blank. Parking 2? Parking 1? *Don't* let him see you hesitate. Ah, it's Parking 3! Push Parking 3, and don't forget to push Close Door or the doors won't close right away. Parking 3, then Close Door, get it? Got it. Okay, now push it.

The doors aren't closing! He purses his lips and sucks in his breath. He reaches past you—you can feel the breeze—and jams his thumb on the Close Door button. The doors close. He looks at the ceiling, at the floor, at the control panel, everywhere but at you. Now you're at P 3. The doors open. Get ready. The exit door into the parking area is supposed to open automatically. Isn't it? *Isn't it?* Or have you forgotten the procedure? Are you supposed to open it with your access card? You hear that little click and it opens. You let out your breath and realize you've been holding it in since you left the eleventh floor. So far so good.

There's a round car key and an octagonal key on the ring. One opens the car door and the other starts the ignition. But which is which? You fumble for the one to open the car door and the whole ring falls to the floor. You bend to pick it up and he elbows you out of the way, grabs the keys off the ground, and unlocks the door with the round key.

Memo for tomorrow: Sort keys in elevator.

The car door's really stiff, hard to open. You try to remember what you did that he might blame you for.

"The hinges need lubricant," you say, trying to sound offhand. You hope he'll think you're one smart cookie for knowing things like that.

He balls his hand into a fist, then slams it into his palm. "That sounds like an accusation," he says through tight lips.

Now you're inside the car. You set your purse down next to you, put your seatbelt on, and insert the key into the ignition. He tries to buckle his seatbelt but your purse is in the way so he grabs it and gets ready to fling it into the backseat. Last time he did that, all the contents flew out. You pull it up against your hip while he hooks up his seatbelt.

"Start the damn car," he says.

Memo for tomorrow: Start ignition *before* buckling up.

Buckle up with left hand and raise purse with right hand while he buckles up.

Now move on out. It's 7:14. Plenty of time. It should take twenty minutes to get to his office if there's no traffic, thirty if there is, but he likes to be early. There are nine turns to get from the underground garage to the street. Here's the first. Here's the second. Not too fast or he'll yell, but not slow either. Watch it now. This is the

tricky one, that confusing spot that looks like a turn lane but is really a parking spot.

"Turn!" he shouts, as you head for the parking spot.

Now you're at street level. Turn right. Easy now. He wants you to make a right turn on one of these streets, but which? Here? You move the wheel a microturn. He grunts. *Not* here. Maybe here. You put on your turn signal. He's silent. You turn the corner.

"Make that light!" he orders. You accelerate and then jam on the brakes as the light turns red. He groans, sucks in his breath, turns away. His shoulders sag. "You picked *exactly* the wrong turns," he says. "You minimized *every single* opportunity to beat the light."

Oh well, you'll make up for it on the highway. You move over into the left lane. No trucks there. He hates to follow trucks. So far so good. It's drizzling. Not much traffic. Good. You reach for the radio, push On. There's no sound. You turn up the volume. Still no sound. He sits there while you fiddle with the dials. He's not giving any clues either, just staring straight ahead. Suddenly, you look up at the road.

Where are you? Nothing looks familiar in the rain. Oh God! Have you missed the turnoff? You look at his face, an angry mask. Has he just been sitting there too furious to say anything? Just then you see the sign for exit 5. Still four exits to go. Don't mess with the radio. Pay attention.

"What's with the radio?" you say. He sucks his teeth, touches the button for the volume control, and sound blares. You steal a look at him and he's rolling his eyes heavenward.

"Cop," he warns. You glance at the speedometer. It reads 57. You look over at the gas gauge. It's edging into the red. You forgot to fill it yesterday! What if you run out of gas? No. Calm down. There's plenty to get there and back.

He was looking at the phone bill last night. Maybe that's what's making him so irritable. You made a long-distance call to your mother last month. He hates spending money on nonessentials, like a second car for you. What you'll do, you'll pay the phone bill out of your grocery allowance and you'll take him out to dinner tonight.

"Get in the middle lane," he orders, whacking his briefcase with his open palm. You jump at the sound. But what about the truck! You'll be behind the truck. He draws his body back, flattens his head against the headrest, and jams his foot on the floorboard.

"You're tailgating!"

* * *

7:43. You pull up to the door of his office. The parking lot is empty. He's the first. He gives a little grunt of satisfaction. You put the car in Neutral and get out while he collects his briefcase, holding the umbrella over him.

"See you at 5:20," he says. He leans toward you. "Kiss," he says, puckering.

You get back into the car. You know he's watching you. Make a smooth exit, don't stall whatever you do. You don't need to look at the steering column like a dummy, you know the order—Park, Reverse, Neutral, Drive. Move the lever one notch to the right. Easy does it. You shift out of Neutral (or had you left it in Park?) and press down firmly on the accelerator. The car leaps, the tires scream. In the wing mirror, half hidden by the stenciled message *Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear*, his face looms, larger and larger, the round eyes, the startled O of his mouth hurtling toward the car.

Memo for tomorrow: Sleep late.

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

T	R	I	G		I	N	C		S	O	H	O	S	
R	I	S	E		S	I	A	M		S	N	A	K	E
O	G	L	E		I	N	C	A		R	E	R	A	N
M	O	E			T	E	A	N	S		A	S	P	S
P	R	O	D	S	F	R	O	M	A	R	C	H	I	E
		F	O	O	L	S		A	T	A	T			
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L	A	T	H	E		S	L	Y			O	C	A	S

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For the first time ever, here are fifteen of the best mystery stories by women taken from the pages of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. Thrilling tales by Ruth Rendell, Sara Paretsky, Mary Higgins Clark, Faye Kellerman, Amanda Cross, Joan Hess, Antonia Fraser and eight other terrific writers are included.

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a **NEW** short story by

H. R. F. KEATING

Readers of EQMM know H.R.F. Keating as a dependable guide to the post-colonial India of the ingenuous Chief Inspector Ghote, but he is equally comfortable bringing to a modern audience the world of the Victorians, something he did to great effect in the novels The Underside (1974) and A Remarkable Case of Burglary (1976). Here he uses the Victorian setting to create a suitably creepy atmosphere for a tale involving a sinister will . . .

FOG OF DOUBT

by H. R. F. KEATING

The fog licked and crept along the alleyway. The young man at the entrance stood for a moment peering. Then in the faint globular radiance from the single sputtering gaslight at the far end he saw what he had been looking for. A signboard, hanging drippingly. Tetter, Morphew & Furfair, Solicitors, Commissioners for Oaths.

He advanced.

Only when he had reached the tall, cramped, decaying building itself was he able to make out from a thin line of light behind the shuttered window next to its ancient door that, late though it was, someone was inside. There was a doorbell. He pulled at it.

The man who came, almost at once, to the door was crusty with age. Dressed in time-shiny black in the fashion of thirty or forty years earlier, short-tailed frock coat, trousers tight to the legs, with a grey muffler at his throat, he cast a suspicion-laden glance upwards.

"I come by appointment," the young man said.

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"Yes, yes. Tetter, senior partner. Young Furfair, our junior partner. Morphew, defunct. This way, this way."

He led the young man into an inner room. Black japanned deed-boxes lining the walls, the names on them indecipherable in the single circle of buttery yellow light from a shaded lamp on the desk. Tetter sat himself in the chair behind.

"You were asked to bring proof of identity."

The young man pulled a letter from his inner pocket.

"From Dr. Harebell, rector of my parish. He has known me from my earliest days. He must have known Mr. Mortimer, too, from whose will you say that I am . . ."

"Something to your advantage, eh? We shall see. We shall see."

The young man pricked.

"Mr. Tetter," he said, his voice unnaturally high, "I feel bound to say I find this all somewhat myster—bewildering. Yes, bewildering. To be asked to come to your office at an hour such as this, your letter saying so little."

"Mr. Jonathan Mortimer's precise instructions in his will dated April the twelfth, eighteen ninety-two. It was to be nine o'clock in the evening, and the transaction to be completed before midnight."

"But, Mr. Tetter, what transaction? I am altogether in the dark."

"I shall explain. As directed. Pray, be seated."

He unlocked the drawer in front of him, drew out a stiff sheet of paper covered in crabbed black handwriting. With a little, dry-throated cough he began to read.

"Whereas I, Jonathan Mortimer, acquired the fortune I have for many years enjoyed by the single expedient of contriving the death of my elder brother, I conceived the highest admiration for such of my fellow men as are capable of any similar act. And whereas, in the course of a life many years long, I have witnessed no action more devoid of the cloying mire of pity than the putting to death of a clutch of innocent, playful puppies, by chance directly beneath my library window, by one William Adams, then aged not so much as nine—"

The young man started from his chair.

"But—But I hated that. Yes, I did it. Oh, I remember. I shall remember as long as I live. But *devoid of pity*? No. It was something that had to be done, but it sickened me then. And the thought sickens me still."

Tetter looked up from the mesmerising lines of close, spiky writing. He allowed a quick hint of a grin to twist his desiccated lips.

"As well for you then, Mr. Adams, that the late Mr. Jonathan Mortimer knew nothing of such sentiments."

He plunged back into his reading.

"I therefore give and bequeath the entire sum of which I die possessed to the said William Adams, to be put into his own hands on the night six months after the day of my decease, in the form of such securities as my solicitors, Messrs. Tetter, Morphew, and Furfair, shall devise, with only such sum reserved as shall serve to pay their proper costs, upon one condition."

Tetter leant back in his chair. There seemed, in the penumbra of light from the lamp, to be a smile on his face. No warm smile.

"That the said William Adams," he jerked forward and read on, "before the hour of midnight on the day this my last will and testament is read to him shall have taken a human life, the act to be witnessed by a full partner in the said firm of Tetter, Morphew, and Furfair."

"Taken? A life? But how can you— Good God, how can you even suggest such a thing?"

"Tetter, Morphew, and Furfair suggest nothing. The suggestion, together with a sum, now held in our safe in the form of negotiable securities, amounting to one hundred and two thousand, four hundred and eighty-seven pounds, five shillings and fourpence, comes entirely from Mr. Jonathan Mortimer, deceased."

A look of shrewd assessment.

William Adams was silent.

"Yes, Mr. Adams, a considerable fortune, is it not? It would enable you to establish yourself, to marry, to—"

He halted. William Adams had bitten his lower lip.

"To marry. To found a family on an impregnable footing. Why, a hundred years from today this fortune will still constitute an inheritance for a great-grandson of yours that will enable him to go into Parliament, cut whatever figure he cares to in the best society. You are yourself, I believe, in a comparatively humble position in the world?"

"What of it? If I had had . . ."

Another smile on Tetter's aged lips. Just as thin, just as cold.

"If you had had money, Mr. Adams? No doubt then you could have done great things. If you had had no more than the income from one hundred and two thousand pounds to live upon."

"But . . . But, even supposing I were to consider this appalling proposition, to consider it for one moment, how in heaven's name

could I carry out the—the provision? Am I expected to step outside your door and strangle the first person I come across?”

“Why, no, Mr. Adams, no such intemperate measure is required. The late Mr. Mortimer was good enough to give some little consideration as to how his proviso might be enacted. It was his wish, you know, that the beneficiary under his will should live to enjoy the fruits of his enterprise.”

Another sly, assessing look from just outside the lamp’s circle of buttery light.

“And— Well, what in fact does he—er—suggest?”

“Hah. Simple enough. Mr. Mortimer draws your attention to the numerous poor wretches in this noble city of London who sleep in the streets night after night without benefit of roof or bed. He even goes so far—” he tapped the stiff sheet in front of him “—as to represent that some among them have lives as worthless as those of a clutch of puppy dogs.”

William Adams drew in a sharp breath.

“But, all the same . . . ”

“Lincoln’s Inn Fields, Mr. Adams, is barely a step away. I pass through each evening, as a matter of fact, on my way to my own fireside. I have observed that a number of vagrants are always to be found there after dark. Sleeping. Many of them, I regret to say, appear to be in the last stages of drunkenness or disease.”

“And . . . And you are to witness what takes place? Whatever may take place?”

“Certainly. My professional duty.”

William Adams pushed back his chair and got to his feet.

“Mr. Tetter,” he said, “I would like you to understand something.”

Tetter looked up at him, with the merest hint of surprise on his aged features.

“If . . . If I were to do this—to do what has been suggested—it would be only for an ultimate good. The—The lady I hope—I have hoped to marry is deeply concerned with the condition of the poor. With such a— With money like that at my disposal, at our disposal, we could take measures that would ensure that no one in all London ever again sleeps on the streets.”

“Admirably put.”

Tetter stood up, went round the desk, and took his hat from its peg.

In unbroken silence William Adams followed him as he made his familiar way through the crisscrossing alleys towards the ancient

gardens, the dark lantern he had picked up from a table in the office hallway unneeded. The fog shifted before them, closed in again behind.

They arrived at the corner of the wide square. Dimly ahead, vanishing and reappearing as the light from a streetlamp above penetrated the fog to greater or lesser extent, the outlines of the huge plane trees beyond could just be made out.

"A pleasant spot," Tetter said, coming to a momentary halt. "Of a summer's evening quite delightful. I often stop for some minutes on my way home and take the air. There is a tablet marking the place where Lord William Russell was executed in the year sixteen eighty-three. I find its perusal instructive."

William Adams peered into the fog.

"And the vagrants? Where—Where are they?"

"Generally to be found sleeping up against the little wall under the railings. Shall we cross over and see?"

"As you like."

"As you like, Mr. Adams."

They went over the wide stretch of the roadway rounding the square.

"No," William Adams said as he stepped up onto the far pavement. "No. I must leave. I cannot— It is monstrous. Monstrous. To face anyone with this dilemma. Old Mortimer, underneath he must have been a devil incarnate."

"Well, he was certainly a murderer, Mr. Adams. He told us that in the will he was so foolish as to make in secret. I would not have advised such a disclosure myself. But in the end we lawyers can do no more than offer advice. And, by the way, in the event of—of, shall we say, nonsuccess tonight, our instructions are to destroy the document. In which case a previous will, properly drawn up by ourselves, will stand. It leaves the money—a pleasant touch of irony perhaps—to the Battersea Dogs' Home."

Abruptly William Adams plunged on into the fog.

In a moment he found himself confronted by a dark looming shape.

"What—What's this?"

A half-step forwards.

"Good God. Only a memorial stone, or something. Mr. Tetter, is it the one marking that execution?"

From the fog just behind came a little dry laugh.

"No, no. It is a drinking fountain, Mr. Adams. I think you will find what you want a few yards to your left."

"No. No, I— Well, a drink of water. Yes, I am suddenly thirsty. A drink of water."

Leaning forward, he found the handle for the jet, pressed it, let the chill stream that shot up play on his face, gulped at it once or twice, stood back.

And, as behind him Tetter opened the shutter of his dark lantern, he saw the deep-incised letters forming an ornamental border to the fountain's stonework. *The Fear of the Lord Is a Fountain of Life.*

For several seconds he stood where he was. Then with a jerk he strode away to his left.

As he did so a carriage came clattering slowly along the road behind. Its lamps, feeble though they were, illuminated for an instant what seemed to be a heap of rags deposited at the foot of the railings.

He approached, knelt, half-rose to his feet again, slowly lowered himself once more.

As if hypnotically drawn on, he extended a hand towards the rags bundle.

Yes, there was a face, almost completely covered. And even in the distant rays of light from the streetlamp it was possible to see how dirt-engrained and emaciated it was. Unmoving in deep or drunken sleep.

He gulped, delicately flicked the rags farther back.

A neck. A thin, scrawny, vulnerable neck. How easy it would be. The slightest pressure . . .

He twisted round and looked back. Tetter, his lantern once more shuttered up, was standing, a black crooked pillar, just beside the drinking fountain. His head seemed sunk upon his breast. Was he truly watching? Did even he have qualms?

He twisted farther round to peer. And lost his balance. His hand shot out to steady himself. Touched something cold as stone.

But not stone. A hand. The hand, surely, of a man stone dead.

He knelt there, still with his own hand covering the other's. As if silently conveying sympathy.

Then, a decision at last arriving, he pushed himself to his feet and strode determinedly over to where Tetter stood beside the drinking fountain. A silent sentinel.

"Mr. Tetter. It is done."

"Done? Well, young man, I didn't think . . . However . . ."

He gave himself a little shake.

"Now, you understand it is not that I do not trust your word, but a lawyer has his duties. Excuse me for one moment."

William Adams watched the old man go over to the bundle of rags he had knelt beside for those two or three significant minutes. The black frock-coated back stooped. A dim ray shot out from the dark lantern. The back remained stooping, long enough to count to perhaps thirty. Straightened.

"Well, Mr. Adams, I suppose I am to congratulate you."

"Let's go. For God's sake, let's go."

"Yes, perhaps it would be as well. And Mr. Furfair will be waiting, with some impatience. He is young still. Hotheaded. But I thought it best to have another witness to the handing over of such a large sum, particularly in the form of transferable securities."

"Yes. Yes, I suppose so."

William Adams's voice was dull. As if with emotional exhaustion.

In a daze of expectation he followed the aged lawyer through the fog.

Was it somehow less swirling now? They seemed to be progressing at a much faster pace.

In another minute they reached the alleyway, strode out towards the hanging sign, Tetter, Morphew & Furfair, Solicitors, Commissioners for Oaths. Morphew defunct.

Tetter pushed open the ancient, grimy door, stepped in ahead.

"This way, this way. Junior partner's room. Young Furfair. Soul of probity. Yes, yes. Undoubtedly. Soul of—"

He opened the door.

Here, too, a lamp on a desk cast a circle of buttery yellow light. By it, it was plain to see, the door of the heavy iron safe was wide open. Its every shelf empty.



THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

Amazing as it may seem today, a feminine byline on a work of mystery fiction was once considered a liability. Despite the prominence of such pioneering American writers as Anna Katharine Green and Mary Roberts Rinehart, along with the Golden Age leadership of British women like Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham, and Agatha Christie, a significant number of women writers of the twenties, thirties, and forties chose male *noms de plume*. Lucy Malleon became Anthony Gilbert. Zenith Brown wrote as Leslie Ford (of ambiguous gender) and as David Frome (definitely masculine). Dorothy Tillet became John Stephen Strange. Georgiana Ann Randolph Craig sometimes wrote as Michael Venning and was best known as Craig Rice.

Female writers who resisted taking blatantly masculine bylines often reverted to initials. L.T. Meade (Elizabeth Thomasina Meade Smith) was a turn-of-the-century example. Mary Violet Heberden, when not writing as Charles L. Leonard, became M.V. Heberden. Books signed as Elizabeth Ferrars in Britain were (and still are) attributed to E.X. Ferrars in this country. The most famous current example is, of course, P.D. James. Other well-established contemporaries using initials include E.X. Giroux (Doris Shannon—in tribute to Ferrars?) and B.M. Gill. Even today, when

women sit in the criminous catbird seat, the tradition persists: of the nineteen women featured in the latest *Sisters in Crime* anthology (reviewed below), no fewer than four go the two-initial route: T.J. MacGregor, P.M. Carlson, K.K. Beck, and K.T. Anders.

The first time the gender tables were turned, causing male writers to adopt feminine pseudonyms, came with the gothic craze of the sixties. Morris Hershman became Evelyn Bond; Michael Avallone adapted his private eye's moniker to write as Edwina Noone; Dean R. Koontz transmogrified into Deanna Dwyer. Generally, the only male romantic suspense writers to keep their usual bylines were those with androgynous first names, like Hillary Waugh or Jean Francis Webb.

Below are considered recent offerings under several variations of the gender-deceptive byline.

**** Ellis Peters: *Fallen Into the Pit*, Recorded Books, 270 Skipjack Rd., Prince Frederick, MD 20678; 1-(800) 638-1304. Peters is the masculine (or at least androgynous) pseudonym of Edith Pargeter. Though her career as a historical novelist dates back to 1936 and she produced three pseudonymous crime novels in Britain between 1938 and 1940 (two as Jolyon Carr and a third as John Redfern), her major career as a mystery writer did not begin until 1951, when this novel appeared under the Par-

geter name. Remarkably, it has never been published in book form in the United States, making this excellent unabridged reading on eight cassettes by Simon Prebble the first American edition in any medium. It's a remarkable achievement, bringing to life an English village adjusting to the post-war world, including the return of the much-changed soldiers and the presence in their midst of a natural murder victim: a young German who still thinks and acts like a Nazi. The novel introduces the Felse family, as significant a creation in my view as the medieval Brother Cadfael who has brought Peters her greatest fame. Police Sergeant George and boy-sleuth Dominic are virtually co-equal protagonists, and their sensitively observed relationship foreshadows Peters's Edgar-winning classic *Death and the Joyful Woman* (1962).

*** E.X. Ferrars: *Beware of the Dog*, Doubleday/Perfect Crime, \$17. Virginia Freer and her estranged husband Felix, a charming crook and inveterate liar who likes to play Great Detective, form one of the more unusual Holmes-Watson teams in current detective fiction. Though elderly Helen Lovelock dies of natural causes, the gathering of her family and friends provides the spark for murder. Ferrars uses some of the most time-honored mystery ingredients (a will, a dog who does not bark, a claimant from Australia) in fresh combinations to produce a typically well-constructed and agreeably-told puzzle. Part of the surprise solution may suggest itself early, but only a

sharp reader will work out all of it.

*** J.A. Jance: *Without Due Process*, \$20. Judith Jance, creator of Seattle police detective J.P. Beaumont, is one of a handful of contemporary women writers writing a male viewpoint character successfully. When a well-liked cop and most of his family are murdered, the whole force works to find the killer, with some surprising help from the other side of the law. Besides being informative on police procedures and politics, the story is gripping and well told. My only complaint: the overly neat conclusion suggests Restoration comedy more than a gritty urban procedural.

*** M.D. Lake: *A Gift for Murder*, Avon, \$4.50. With the two initials a dead giveaway and the narrator an independent female sleuth, Lake has to be a woman, right? Wrong! In an ingenious double fake, the pseudonymous author, who seems to my admittedly masculine eye to do an excellent job of writing from a woman's perspective, is really Allen Simpson (not the Senator). In her fourth case, campus cop Peggy O'Neill looks for the killer of bestselling novelist Cameron Harris among his colleagues in the university's Tower Writers' Collective. There is some pointed satire on academics and various modes of contemporary writing. Lake applies Sue Grafton's style to Amanda Cross's turf, an agreeable combination.

*** Hamilton Crane: *Miss Seeton Goes to Bat*, Berkley, \$3.99. When others took over the Seeton series after the death of Heron Carvic, they used bylines in the same tradition, beginning with Hampton Charles

(James Melville). Thus, the village spinster's current chronicler, Sarah Jill Mason, gives us a possibly unique gender reversal in the current market: a woman writing an almost terminally cozy series using a male byline. The plot is slight, and Miss Seeton's adventures, running to Clouseau-ish slapstick, may be better suited to the screen than the page. But the climactic cricket match between the rival towns of Plummergen and Murreystone is a sports lover's delight. (If you are ignorant of cricket, see how much you can figure out about the game from the descriptions of it here.)

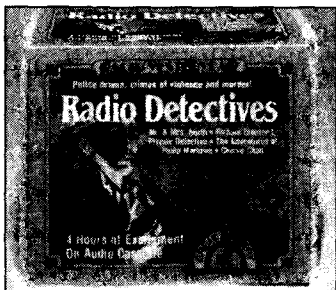
** Stan Cutler: *Shot on Location*, Dutton, \$19. In their third appearance, ageing private eye Rayford Goodman and gay ghostwriter Mark Bradley trade off the teeth-grindingly jokey narrative in an apparent effort to see who can irritate the reader more. Yes, there are some laughs—a really silly gag on page forty got to me—but the book is too long and the batting average too low. The mystery, based all too clearly on the Brando family case of a few years ago, is not too diverting most of the way, though it is resolved ingeniously enough in a *Thin Man*-style gathering-of-the-suspects windup.

It's hard to keep up with all the excellent anthology series, except to note they now have numbers attached in the manner of Super

Bowls and movie sequels: Ed Gorman's noir-flavored *Dark Crimes 2* (Carroll & Graf, \$22.95 hardcover, \$12.95 trade paperback) is a generous 512-page collection of all lengths, short-short to novel, mostly relatively unfamiliar reprints by very well-known writers but topped off with an effective new horror tale by fan publisher Gary Lovisi. Peter Sellers's Canadian *Cold Blood I* (Mosaic Press, \$19.95) has an especially nice jacket illustration by Henry van der Linde, commemorating the 1992 Toronto Bouchercon, where the book was first distributed. Marilyn Wallace's gender-specific *Sisters in Crime 5* (Berkley, \$4.99) includes a chilling and offbeat original by the renowned Joyce Carol Oates, a droll reprint by Susan Dunlap, and several samples for series shoppers. The new stories about Sister Carol Anne O'Marie's sleuthing nun Sister Mary Helen, Karen Kijewski's private eye Cat Colorado, and K.K. Beck's Golden-Age flapper Iris Cooper have the charm and ingenuity to attract new readers to their book-length cases. Diane Mott Davidson's "Cold Turkey," about caterer-sleuth Goldy Bear, is amusingly told if a little too silly in plot. Least well served is the series that needs the least help finding readers: Sara Paretsky's reprinted V.I. Warshawski tale, "The Takamoku *Joseki*," has a fascinating background of Go-playing but its solution is a severe letdown.

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a **NEW** short story by

TERRY MULLINS

Series time and real time seldom correspond; characters age as their creators choose. Terry Mullins's Rosso Pallone debuted here in 1989 as an eighteen-year-old shop clerk who aspired to police work. This outing finds him well-ensconced on the force, giving ear to the views of a seasoned cop. . . .

THAT'S JUST HIS WAY

by **TERRY MULLINS**

“It’s a real shame about Lieutenant Sulla,” Patrick Casey said. “I’ve been on the force for twenty-three years and I’ve never served under a finer man. I never was what you’d call close to him, what with me being Irish and him Italian, but he always trusted me. Said so to others, too, said he trusted me like family.”

Cross, who hated Sulla with an intensity usually reserved for infanticides, threw up his hands and walked away. Rosso Pallone stayed and listened. He knew why his friends, younger members on the force, despised the lieutenant, but he wanted to know why Casey liked him so much.

“I remember,” Casey resumed, “at the time of the hostage standoff when Schwartz had wounded two of ours and had released his wife and daughter and they told us he had killed two men he found with her, Sulla nearly had his head shot off. The bullet came within inches. And he ducked and said, ‘This looks like a job for Casey,’ and everybody laughed. It sort of broke the tension, you see.

“The trouble was, this Schwartz was such a good shot. He was using a semiautomatic rifle and was going from window to window. We never knew where he would show up. There was three downstairs windows and two on the second floor. He’d done most of his

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shooting from downstairs but once in a while when nobody was expecting it, he'd fire from an upstairs window and that would give him a better shot at us ducking down behind cars and all. Quick as a squirrel he was, going from one window to another and even upstairs. His wife was sitting behind the van and screaming that he'd never be taken alive, he swore to that.

"So when Sulla said it was a job for me, everybody sort of laughed and relaxed. Of course I said, 'What do you want me to do, Lieutenant?' And he said, 'We'll keep you covered, two of us covering the end windows and one each the middle and upstairs, understand?'

"So I said, 'Sure,' though I didn't see how they could cover me when none of us could even look over the top of a car without taking a bullet, but he was giving the orders.

"He told everybody what they was to do and he said to me, 'When I give the word, you run to the house and take this guy. If he tries to shoot, one of us will get him.' So I gets ready and he says, 'Go!' and I run as fast as I can and I hits the door. I hit it with my shoulder and side, though he says later that I butted it down with my head.

"The door goes in, hinges and all, and there is Schwartz standing in the parlor goggle-eyed, with his mouth hanging open like he couldn't believe what he's seeing. I guess he really was crazy like the court said he was. Anyway, I walks up to him and takes the gun away from him and leads him out as peaceful as a lamb. All the guys cheered and Lieutenant Sulla claps me on the shoulder and says, 'I knew I could trust you to do the job.' And we take poor old Schwartz in, but his wife calls him a liar."

Pallone, who had been listening entranced, found that his hoagy was getting soggy, so he concentrated on eating for a while. Then he asked, "How come you never got promoted? After all, twenty-three years is a long time."

"That was Sulla's doing, too. He was sergeant when I joined. One day a pusher comes up to me while I'm cruising around the Hunting Park area and tries to hand me a couple of twenty-dollar bills. He says bold as life that he's working that corner and don't want no trouble. I says, 'No trouble at all,' and hauls him in. Sulla books him and says to me, 'We need men like you out there, Casey. A man would be a fool to promote you and take you off the beat.' And he never did, not even when he became lieutenant and had a say in such things. He knew he could trust me."

"But you're Irish and he's Italian."

"Never made any difference to him. He was broad-minded that way. He always used to say, 'The only ones I trust are Italians and Irish.' He didn't like Jews and blacks, that's a fact."

"And he never called them Jews and blacks."

Casey laughed. "That's a fact, too. He used some rough language at times, but that's just his way. He doesn't mean nothing by it. Many a time he's called me a dumb Irish cop. That's just his way, rough and hearty. I know the papers call him a racist, but he was that way toward everybody."

"They also say he beat up blacks and Latinos."

"I wouldn't know about that. As I told the jury, I never seen him beat up on blacks—unless they was resisting arrest, of course—no more than anyone else. Of course, I've heard things, too, but you never know about things you hear. Some of his really close friends, they used to brag about how him and them would catch black or Latino drug pushers and beat the hell out of them—not out on the street where people could see them, but in crack houses they was raiding. I always thought they was just sounding off, because he never done nothing like that when I was with him. But, as I said, I wasn't never one of his close friends. Still, he trusted me."

Pallone didn't say anything. He hadn't been on the force long enough to know Lieutenant Sulla. He too had heard things, things that hadn't come up at the trial, things about his hatred of gays and his scorn of the homeless. "Welfare leeches," he called them. Pallone waited for the older man to continue.

Casey sighed a thoughtful sigh. "I'm afraid the jury didn't believe me," he said, "especially after his friends had testified. I can't understand it. They was his best friends. Most of them owed their promotions to him, yet they sat there and said whatever the prosecution wanted them to say."

"They had to tell the truth. They were testifying under oath."

"But it don't seem right. They was in it with him on most everything. They seemed eager to testify against him. I know they was just trying to save their own skins, but they seemed to enjoy nailing him to the wall."

"I wish the prosecution had asked me about the time we arrested Ali the Prophet; you know, the guy who threw an egg when the president was making a speech here. I was on crowd duty then and I saw the guy throw the egg. It scared me at first because I thought it was a grenade until it splattered on the platform."

"So I saw the guy and I chased after him. He ran behind the telephone building and three of us had him trapped. Sulla joined us—he had just been promoted to lieutenant back then—and kept hollering, 'Shoot the bastard! He's got a gun. He tried to kill the president.' I guess he thought as I had that he'd thrown a grenade.

"So Reilly and I ran in at the rear where there was some dumpsters and I saw something move in one of them. So I climbed up and saw Ali the Prophet burrowing into old telephone directories and I jumped him and arrested him.

"He didn't have no weapon, so I called to Reilly, 'Tell Lieutenant Sulla we've got him.' No sooner did I mention Sulla than this guy says, 'Cuff me to you.' And I said, 'No need for that. You got no weapon.' But he insisted and said he wouldn't leave the dumpster unless he's cuffed to me.

"I wasn't going to stay there in a stinking dumpster all day, and it's a steep climb out of there. I needed some cooperation from him. So I cuffed him to my wrist and we climbed out.

"Sulla and two other officers came up and he saw Ali cuffed to me and he began to cuss him out, but he never laid a hand on him, I'll swear to that. So Sulla and some of them went back to headquarters and told me and Reilly to bring him along.

"To get there we had to fight our way through a crowd of reporters and this guy starts hollering that he wants to call his lawyer. One of the reporters asks if we're going to let him call his lawyer, and they all sort of wait to see what I say.

"So I said he could call his lawyer and he bolts to a pay phone booth pulling me along with him. He calls his lawyer and then Reilly and me shoved our way through the press and into headquarters.

"When we get to Sulla, he says, 'Good work, Casey. Now unlock the cuffs and you and Reilly go report to the captain.' About that time, the guy's lawyer shows up and I uncuffs him and go and make my report.

"That's exactly how it happened. Sulla never done nothing to the guy even though he was mad as hell at him. So I don't think you can believe all the stories you hear people telling about him. That Ali guy was black and he was gay and he was on welfare, but Sulla never hurt him a bit."

"But he didn't promote black cops. You've got to admit that."

"No, that's a fact. He didn't. I asked him about it from time to time, the last time when he made his nephew sergeant over Cooper, who was four years his senior. The union made a big fuss over it,

and the *Daily News* rode him for months with articles and pictures and columns and headlines. So one day when we was in the locker room I asked him about it and he said he didn't have anything against Cooper for being black. He said, 'I need someone I know for this job and I know my nephew a lot better than I know Cooper. I've got to work real close with the sergeant and I need to know everything about him. I've known my nephew since he was a baby and I sure ain't known Cooper that long. It ain't because Cooper is black. I've never promoted you either, and you ain't black, are you?' And everyone in the locker room laughed, me included. He didn't have nothing against Cooper. That's just his way. The next promotion that came along he gave to Cooper."

"After the newspapers and union made him do it."

"Aw, he'd have done it anyway. He said so."

"What about stealing gas?" Pallone asked.

"He didn't steal it. None of us thought of it as stealing. He'd just fill up his car. The city wouldn't miss twenty gallons. I guess he did a lot of driving in his own car for the city."

"You ever do it?"

"No, of course not. But I never used my car on official business either. He and his friends and his nephew worked together and there was times when they didn't want to use squad cars—too conspicuous."

● "But five thousand dollars' worth a year!"

"That's exaggerating. You know he couldn't have used that much city gas in a year."

"According to the prosecution, he had a lot of friends helping him."

"Still, it would have been on the up and up. The trouble is that once a guy makes one little slip, people dig up all sorts of things and make it sound like everything he ever done was wrong."

"One little slip? Like giving a ten-thousand-dollar bribe to a judge?"

"Yes, that was wrong. I can't think what made him do a thing like that. It wasn't even like him or his family was involved. He didn't even know the guy. He got caught in the middle."

"Oh, come on, Casey! It's obvious why he did it. He got a fifty-thousand-dollar bribe and he passed ten thousand on to the judge. He cleared forty thousand dollars on the deal."

"That's what I mean, Ross. I don't know why he did it. It isn't as if he needed the money. He always had plenty of dough. Of course, him and his wife both had expensive cars, but they'd always had

that sort of thing. Neither of them gambled. I suppose it was his son. It takes a lot to send a son to Harvard and then to law school. Still, I'd never have thought it of him. And it would never have happened if he'd let me carry the envelope as he started to."

"What really happened there? The prosecution started to question you about it and the defense objected and we never got to hear the whole story."

"It was right after lunch. Lieutenant Sulla called me into his office just after a man had left. I was pretty sure the man was Dog Leg Milan, but I couldn't swear to it in court and it didn't matter anyway because Dog Leg admitted it was him.

"When I went in Sulla was alone and he was just sealing a fat brown envelope, one of those extra-big ones, you know. And he starts to say that I'm to take this message to judge—and that's as far as he gets because his nephew comes busting in and says let him deliver it. So he tells me to go and I leave and he lets his nephew make the delivery."

"And the nephew was wearing a wire."

"That's it. He wants to plea bargain, so he's working with the prosecution. And did you ever hear anything like that tape? I couldn't believe it. The lieutenant must have been out of his mind. He sits there talking with his nephew and going all over the bribe he got from Dog Leg and the bribe he's sending the judge and everything. You ever hear of such a thing? It's stupid. And his nephew is wearing a wire. I still can't believe it. Maybe it happened the way he said it did, that he was just testing his nephew, seeing if he was crooked."

"There was a lot of evidence against him. Dog Leg admitted giving him the fifty-thousand-dollar bribe."

"I know, but he admitted it so he'd get a lighter sentence. Sulla did used to test people, especially young people. He tested me once just after I had joined the force.

"He was sergeant then and hadn't started calling me a dumb Irish cop. He called me a red-necked Irishman because I came here from Georgia. There wasn't many blacks on the force then and he teamed me up with one of them, Pobrey Morse, just to see how I would get along with him, I guess.

"A call came in that some psycho was loose in Cheltenham armed with two hunting knives. Sulla said, 'It's the orangutan guy again. Why don't they keep him locked up?'

"Then he calls me aside and says, 'Look out for this one. He's a huge Austrian with arms as long as one of those red monkeys in the zoo. You let Pobrey take him. That's an order.' I didn't know then, but this psycho had been in the Hitler Youth Corps and came over after the war. He still thought he was a member of the master race even though they got the crap beat out of them.

"So we go cruising through Cheltenham and we see this giant standing at the door of a synagogue waving two long-bladed knives and shouting obscenities at the people inside. He's saying the men should come out so he can circumcise them real good.

"I told Pobrey what Sulla had said and he nodded. 'He told me the same thing,' he said, 'and he told me not to use my gun, just my stick.' That didn't make sense to either of us, so I said, 'He didn't tell me anything about my gun, just to let you take him, so I'm going over to that mailbox and draw a bead on him. Then you go and try to arrest him. If he attacks you, I'll take him out.'

"So I go to the mailbox and draw my pistol and lean over the mailbox with my pistol braced real steady. And Pobrey walks toward him from the car and tells him to drop his knives and put his hands behind his back. Like Sulla told him, Pobrey is just carrying his stick and a pair of cuffs. The psycho may be nuts, but he can put two and two together. He looks from Pobrey to me and back to Pobrey and then at me. And Pobrey keeps on walking toward him and telling him to drop his weapons.

"Well, this big freak starts laughing and throws his knives one at a time into the synagogue door and says, 'You want excuse to kill me. I not give you excuse.' And Pobrey handcuffs him and we take him to headquarters.

"When we got back, Sergeant Sulla used every cuss word he ever heard and made up a few. It was after that that he began to call me a dumb Irish cop. He's really a nice guy. I can't understand how he ever got mixed up with bribes and such."

"I hear you are finally going to be promoted," Pallone said.

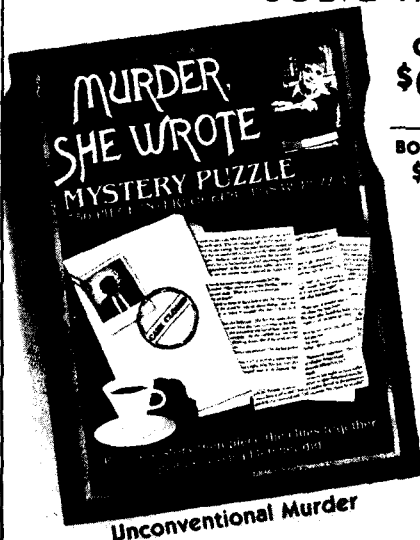
"Yes," was the muted reply, "with all those officers convicted, there are a lot of vacancies now and I've been promoted to sergeant. I don't know what Lieutenant Sulla will think about that. I hope I can make him proud of me."



NEW!

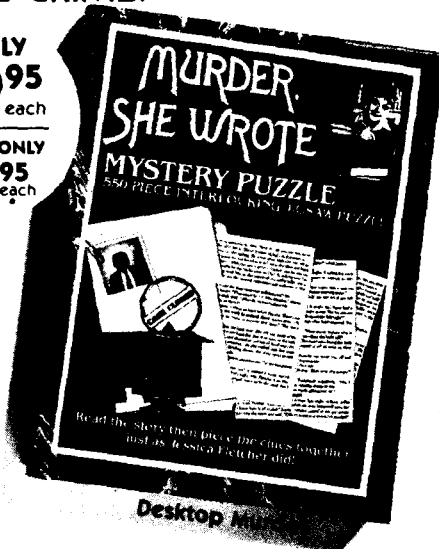
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As is the case with many good writers, Stephen Wasylyk has pursued several different careers. Following a stint as a commercial airline pilot after World War II, he moved into the arts via photography and eventually served as creative director for a sales promotion business. He began writing mystery stories in 1968 and first graced our pages in 1977, entertaining us always with his subtle style of irony. . . .

PARENTAL DISCRETION

by STEPHEN WASYLYK

Asher Clipp garaged his car, clasped his bag of groceries to his chest, gazed thoughtfully at his unmowed lawn—have to get around to that one of these days—and checked his mailbox before entering his home.

Three envelopes. All bills. Wonderful.

Even the mail no longer produced anything exciting. There was Christmas, of course, although the cards each year were fewer and fewer, with one invariably containing the notation, "Sorry to tell you that So-and-so is no longer with us," or words to that effect. Really not a surprise among people of his age. He'd had to write his version on his own cards three years ago.

He'd given up looking forward to hearing from the kids. Peter was a stockbroker in Los Angeles, too busy making money to be bothered. Kevin was somewhere in New Mexico, doing something good. Always doing something good, Kevin. Very unprofitable, doing something good. Angie was in New York, married to that short guy who ran a restaurant. Flaunted a little too much money to be a mere owner of a restaurant, but then maybe owning a restaurant in New York was far more profitable than it was elsewhere.

He stored away his groceries and pulled the state lottery ticket from his shirt pocket, reviewing the numbers. Magic numbers. Might bring him twenty million. Not that he needed money like that. At the moment, all he could think of to do with it was charter

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an executive jet and fly around the country. Visit all the places he'd never managed to get to. Might even drop in at Los Angeles, New York, and New Mexico. If he was in the mood.

He placed it on the window sill above the sink to remind himself to watch the drawing that night, put water on to boil for instant coffee, and sat at the kitchen table with the outdoor sportsman's magazine he'd picked up in the drugstore. Never cared for that sort of thing himself, but it was always interesting to see how others spent their time.

The idea didn't occur to him until he was almost finished with both the magazine and the instant coffee. He leafed through again. At least ten ads urged him to send for their beautiful new free catalogues.

There you go, Asher, he told himself. Give you something to look forward to in the mail.

No way for any of them to know he had no intention of buying anything since he had no use at all for any of their products.

During the next two years, his name and address spread like a virus to other lists. More catalogues came, including one for women's intimate apparel from a firm unable to differentiate between indoor and outdoor sportsmen. They were looking forward to his order.

Right. What were the shipping charges for the blonde on page five?

Still, the catalogues were interesting. He learned more about hunting, fishing, fly rods, spinners, lures, boots, waders, boats, reels, pistols, rifles, ammunition, air guns, archery, binoculars, telescopic sights, camouflage clothing, tents, insect repellent, and dozens of other products catering to the needs of the outdoor sporting fraternity than he ever wanted to know; along with homey little bits of advice on how to catch fish, plunk varmints, and bring down big-horn sheep.

Fascinated, he subscribed to several sporting magazines. He read and treasured them all, stacking them neatly, chronologically, and by category—along with the catalogues—on shelves in a no-longer-used bedroom, to be resurrected for reference when someone named Bill offered advice contradictory to that offered by someone named Bob in Letters to the Editor.

Asher was content. The contents of his mailbox were no longer dull.

Without leaving his home, wetting a line, or pulling a trigger, he could now talk knowledgeably with those who did, like Cliff Hernon. Cliff's preference in leisure activities was prominently displayed alongside his house in the trailored fiberglass boat, an ugly sight that irritated the hell out of his wife every time she looked out a window. If I wanted to look at a damned boat every day, I'd have moved to the waterfront, she told Myrtle Haffner. Myrtle told her she should have married a golfer. The equipment required for his leisure activity could be thrown into a closet. Along with the golfer when he was late for dinner.

The day the long-suffering postman found yesterday's thick delivery still bulging out of the box, he suggested to Myrtle that it might be worth looking into. Very unusual. He always heard the rustle of paper and the clank of the mailbox lid behind him as he continued on his route.

A decisive, no-nonsense person, Myrtle knew an emergency when she saw one. She dialed 911 with a firm hand.

Sure enough, Asher was dead, but not from any of the expected natural causes. An atavistic monster who didn't give a fig for the civilized aspects of dispatching someone with a Glock 9mm, an S&W .38, or a Colt .45 with hollow-point ammo—or for the advantages of a nine-inch hunting and fishing knife with a folding Swedish steel blade, for that matter—had reverted to type and throttled him with bare hands.

Detectives McLean and Herrmann (given in his sleep to muttering “*two r's and two n's*”) arrived shortly after the discovery. Both were stocky, wore sport coats and slacks, were tieless, and were losing hair at the same rate. They'd worked together for so long, they looked alike, spoke alike, and thought alike.

They were surprised to find the house spotless from attic to basement and absolutely nothing out of place, a fitting testimonial to years of training by Asher's dead wife. Even Asher had been neatly placed in a chair, although he obviously hadn't been responsible for that.

Not the work of a burglar, they agreed. Nothing seemed to be missing and no sign of forced entry could be found. Asher had opened his door to someone who had abused his hospitality.

After noting the catalogues and magazines upstairs, and hefting the two-day stack of mail and learning the tonnage was a daily

occurrence, Herrmann suggested that the postman would be a prime suspect.

In rare disagreement, McLean pointed out that the nightly massaging of an aching shoulder—not to mention the mandatory inhaling of the pungent odor of eucalyptus ointment—might be a motive, but postal service employees were forbidden to murder patrons. It eroded the revenue base, and the negative publicity advanced the fortunes of UPS and Federal Express.

The assistant M.E. concluded that Asher had died during the early morning, those hours when most good, hardworking citizens were asleep.

Lieutenant Rodriguez, in charge of the forensic team, looked around the spotless house and predicted their efforts would be futile.

Not necessarily, McLean said. Since the man couldn't have strangled himself, someone had been there, and no one passes through the continuum of space without leaving a trace. Indeed, the swirling eddies marking his passage often left behind puzzling questions. For example:

He held up a plastic bag. Why would a cleaning freak like Asher keep an expired and worthless two-year-old lottery ticket on the window sill above the kitchen sink, where it had to be moved whenever the sill was cleaned, rather than throw it out?

Rodriguez muttered something in Spanish, the translation of which would be bleeped on network TV.

McLean and Herrmann set forth to interview the neighbors, McLean to the left, Herrmann to the right. Three hours later, they returned to meet at the house, now sealed by Rodriguez. The radio told them he'd found a fingerprint on the lottery ticket that did not belong to Asher.

They were also informed the lieutenant had notified the next of kin. Peter would arrive in the morning. Alone. Angie and her husband were on their way. The husband came from people who took the presence of relatives—close and distant, by blood or law—at a funeral very seriously. Those who did not give, did not receive. Better to be borne to your final resting place free of charge by relatives, however remote, than by pallbearers hired by the funeral director with a markup for himself.

Kevin had yet to be located. For all anyone knew, he was doing good in a pueblo somewhere.

The detectives compared notes. Without exception, everyone said that Asher Clipp had been a nice, quiet, courteous neighbor. Which

meant nothing, of course. For all they knew, he could have moonlighted as a geriatric hit man. The only complaint was that he hadn't been as diligent about mowing his lawn as he might have been.

Perhaps because he'd been diligent in other matters. McLean had run into a weeping, red-eyed widow who would sadly miss her kind, considerate neighbor. Herrmann had interviewed another whose sad smile hinted of unnamed delights which would now have to be sought elsewhere. Both detectives discarded the possibility of a third woman, still married. A jealous husband as a suspect would have been nice, but given Asher's age, in that circumstance his lawn would probably *never* have been mowed.

Nothing and no one unusual had been noticed. One man reported seeing a cab drive by, but that was normal. Women took cabs to be certain they arrived on their doorsteps safely, and certain neighborhood celebrants took cabs to be certain they arrived on the *correct* doorstep. In the dark, the homes had a similarity that could get an inebriate into deep trouble. Even shot.

As the detectives were about to leave the house, a cab pulled up and discharged a tall, thin, tanned man with a ratty duffel bag slung over his shoulder. His face hadn't felt a razor in at least three days and his scraggly, long dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail. He was dressed in torn jeans, a blue T-shirt that said "Give till it hurts," and battered cowboy boots.

He looked at the house, apparently puzzled by the yellow police placard on the door forbidding entrance.

Having been told that Asher had a son in New Mexico doing good things, McLean sensed that this was he. The local people who did good things dressed just as fashionably, but they never wore cowboy boots. He broke the news to him gently.

Kevin sank to the curb and held his head in his hands. He realized he'd been remiss in filial devotion since his mother had died, but he'd been very busy doing good, which was not very remunerative. It had taken him five years to save the money to fly home, only to have the airline go bankrupt. They'd refused to refund his money and arranged for an alternate carrier on a space-available basis, which had brought him here by way of Seattle, Los Angeles, Denver, St. Louis, Chicago, Dallas, Atlanta, San Juan, and Philadelphia. He was looking forward to a stop in Nome, Alaska, on the way home.

Patting him on the shoulder, McLean joined him on the curb and listened sympathetically.

Now he and his father could no longer do all the macho father-son things he'd looked forward to, like attending the opera and poetry readings or working together in a soup kitchen. He regretted that hadn't been taken care of through the years, but he and his father hadn't gotten along too well.

With the house sealed until the next day to keep the scene of the crime uncontaminated until the forensic crew had extracted whatever information might be there, he had no place to stay and no money for a hotel or motel room. He hadn't even been able to tip the cabdriver who brought him here.

McLean assured him they would work something out. Since he looked so sleazy, he could pass for an overworked undercover narc asleep at a desk. As long as no one noticed the cowboy boots.

At the station, Kevin sat with coffee in hand and told them that he and his father had misunderstood each other from day one. He had wanted only to do good, but his father had said that if he insisted on ending broke, shattered, and disillusioned in his old age, he should chase women, which offered a great deal more fun than doing good.

McLean knew exactly how he felt. His father had been bitterly disappointed when he'd become a cop rather than a nuclear physicist.

Murmuring that Kevin's tears were weakening his coffee and he would get him a fresh cup, Herrmann removed it from his hand and disappeared.

As Kevin's tale continued, a young policewoman whispered into McLean's ear and shortly thereafter ushered in Angie and her husband. She was a short woman who looked a great deal like Kevin, hair in a ponytail and all. Her ponytail, however, had obviously been created by someone named Jorge at great cost and effort, the short, tight dress by someone named Pierre, and the shoes by someone named Armando. No cowboy boots for her.

Her husband was a short, fat man with a loud voice, who had to be told to keep it quiet by Sergeant Helsinki, who was having trouble convincing a woman that poisoning her neighbor's cat wasn't quite the same as the cat killing birds. Silly as it sounded, the cat had broken no law, but poisoning it would.

Angie was equally regretful about neglecting her father, but her husband had been very busy in his restaurant, and she had been very busy spending all the money he made. Shopping was very stressful and took a great deal of time.

She too had wanted to spend quality time with her father doing the father-daughter things, although she couldn't think at the moment of what they might be. Her father had never been interested in visiting beauty salons or in shopping.

Herrmann saw that they were both well supplied with coffee and when the china cups were empty, took them from their hands and disappeared.

McLean listened and asked questions, eyelids drooping, supporting his chin on a hand to keep from nodding off. Listening to people like Kevin, Angie, and her husband either made him sleepy or gave him a headache.

The unexpected appearance of Peter brought him fully awake.

He'd foregone the coach ticket on the red-eye flight he'd intended to take, said Peter. He'd flown first class on the first available non-stop, surrounded by movie stars, authors of best-selling diet books, network executives, a few U.S. senators, and several retired airline employees. He might not have approved of him, but Asher was his father, after all.

The family resemblance was apparent, although he'd tried to disguise it with clothing from a store that accepted only bearer bonds—up front. No ponytail or cowboy boots. Stockbrokers were forbidden to wear those.

His father had been a big disappointment to him, he said. Had no idea of the value of money at all. Used to buy him ice-cream cones when he was a boy, when he'd rather have had the money to invest. Still, he'd looked forward to one day doing all the father-son things they'd never gotten around to, like studying the stock market reports together and comparing the performance of mutual funds.

Herrmann disappeared with his coffee cup. McLean massaged his brow. Peter had brought on the headache.

In his opinion, said Peter, his father had been killed by a burglar who had fled in a panic without taking anything. As far as entry was concerned, the front door was never locked. He had nothing worth stealing, his father always said, and he'd never heard of a locked front door stopping anyone who really wanted to get in.

None of them noticed a slim, mysterious Asiatic come and go after gazing upon them all. "Atsa the one," he said, indicating he'd learned to speak English in an Italian neighborhood.

Peter rose and said it was time for them all to go about the business of burying their father. Obtaining and comparing estimates from funeral homes took time.

McLean motioned him to be seated.

Detectives were devious, he said. He hadn't been the least bit interested in their opinions of their father. Those were rather clear, since none had bothered to contact him for five years.

It had all been a devious ploy to keep them on hand while certain matters were investigated. They might not believe it, but the bedlam they witnessed of phones ringing, people rushing in and out, and an occasional shout here and there was really very organized.

While their stories might be true, they might also be lies.

When the lieutenant had called Los Angeles to inform Peter of his father's demise, he'd talked to Peter's answering machine. It was quite possible for Peter to have flown in earlier, rented a car, killed his father, and driven away. In this blessed age of high tech, he'd then called the answering machine, listened to the lieutenant, and returned the call from a local booth, making his appearance after a decent interval as if he'd just flown in with all those movie stars.

As for Kevin, he might have arrived on the red-eye from New Mexico, taken a cab to the house, killed his father, and walked away, reappearing later in another cab as if he'd just arrived.

As for Angie, she and her husband didn't live all that far away in New York. One could have killed Asher and been home in plenty of time to do a little shopping and take the lieutenant's call.

While they'd sat there drinking coffee and telling him how sorry they were their father was dead, airline passenger lists had been checked, phone calls made, and cabbies and all sorts of other people abroad in the early hours of the morning interviewed.

He knew who had lied, he said. In those early hours, people were perhaps more observant because there was less to observe.

An uplifted hand stilled their vehement protests that none of them could be guilty because none of them had a motive. He wouldn't bore them with the details of the gritty and tiresome police work that had revealed that while Asher hadn't been wealthy, no one would ever have to stage a benefit on his behalf. Unless he fell into the hands of the medical profession. He had quite a bit stashed away here and there, not to mention the value of the house. He might not have known much about money, but he *had* known about real estate, particularly the advantage of location, location, location. When Myrtle Haffner once talked about selling and moving, he'd told her to hold on. Houses went up a hundred grand a year later, said Myrtle, because they'd built that industrial park a few miles down the road and executives were offering a piece of their pension plan for one of

the very convenient homes. God, how she'd miss that lovely man.

None had a motive?

Peter could certainly use the money from the ice-cream cones his father had once bought him. His specialization in junk bonds had not only cost him his Jaguar, his private plane, and his hacienda, but one well-shod foot was hovering over the threshold of a federal prison.

Kevin had done so much good for everyone that all his credit cards had been canceled and seven county sheriffs and quite a few residents of New Mexico, bearing rifles, were looking for him for passing bad checks.

And Angie? Her husband needed more than a restaurant. He needed the profits from a fast-food franchise with five hundred outlets just to pay for her shoes.

Motive? One-third of what the old man possessed was far more than any of them had.

McLean regarded them all thoughtfully.

But there was another piece to this mystery.

The lottery ticket.

They had checked the number. For an entire year—twelve months—365 days—Asher Clipp had *twenty million dollars* sitting on the window sill above his sink. In plain sight like that, he certainly hadn't forgotten or overlooked it, yet he'd never cashed it in. There was nothing anywhere to indicate he belonged in an asylum, so he must have known exactly what he was doing.

The ticket had a fingerprint on it that wasn't Asher's.

Would the owner of the print care to confess and make life easier for everyone, and possibly explain why Asher Clipp had deliberately allowed twenty million dollars to slip away?

Silence.

And then a small voice said, because he was a son of a bitch. At the very least a gratuitous insult to a perfectly innocent paternal grandmother who had probably dispensed cookies with a warm and loving heart.

Elucidate, said McLean.

"He didn't cash it immediately because he didn't want the publicity," said the voice, still small. "After a few months, he told himself he was perfectly happy pretending to be an outdoor sportsman and didn't want the money at all. Of course, *we* would, but he hadn't heard from any of us in the four years since Mother's funeral. We really didn't deserve a damned penny. But he'd be fair. If one of us

phoned or sent him so much as a postcard before the ticket expired, *that* one could have the entire twenty million. None of us did, so he let the ticket expire."

Holding his head and moaning, Peter stamped his expensive shoes and rocked to and fro.

Angie and her husband leaped to their feet, clawing at each other and screaming, *It's all your fault!*

Kevin sat, regarding his cowboy boots.

"He had no right to do that," he said. "Made me so mad I strangled him."

"He could have claimed the money and cut you out of his will."

"Too easy for him. Had to have the last word, like all parents. Had to rub it in with that expired ticket, show us how much more we might have had. He'd been a teacher all his life, and this was a lesson, you see. He was always doing that."

Acquainted with the law that said a murderer couldn't profit from his crime, Peter, Angie, and her husband had reached for pocket calculators and were whispering, comparing notes, and dividing everything by two.

They had to be the slowest learners McLean had ever come across.

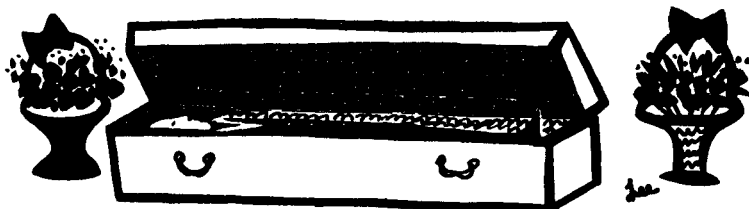
He and Herrmann smiled at each other.

According to a will less than a year old, the three of them would get lifetime subscriptions to Asher's favorite outdoor magazines. Kevin's delivered in prison, of course. No grinning judge would object to that.

Give them something to look forward to in the mail.

The rest went to several organizations dedicated to saving the lakes, streams, and rivers and preserving our shores and wilderness areas, even though Asher had never gotten around to enjoying them himself.

But, as Herrmann pointed out, when you have two widows and a lawn to take care of, it's hard to find time for anything else.



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a **NEW** short story by

MONICA QUILL

A great patron of the modernist movement in the arts, Gertrude Stein is still widely quoted. She coined the phrase “lost generation” for the noted American writers, including Hemingway and Fitzgerald, who visited her salon in Paris, and demonstrated in her own writing the belief that by breaking rules of syntax one might convey a different aspect of experience—a notion with which Sister Mary Teresa Dempsey, a logician to the core, appears to take exception in the following tale . . .

**A ROSE IS A ROSE
IS A ROSE**

by **MONICA QUILL**

1.

The roses began to arrive in late February, richly red, long-stemmed, three at a time. At midmorning of Saturday, the truck would pull to the curb outside the house on Walton Street where the remnant of the Order of Martha and Mary lived, a delivery man would scamper up the steps, ring the bell, thrust the roses at Kim or Joyce, and say, slowly and distinctly, “A rose is a rose is a rose.”

The first time this happened, Joyce had been too stunned even to ask what was meant. Open-mouthed, she watched the man run back out to his truck, put it in gear, and ease into the flow of traffic.

“It’s obviously a mistake,” Sister Mary Teresa Dempsey harumphed when Joyce and Kim stood before her in the study where the elderly nun was busy producing the daily quota of pages that brought her history of the twelfth century ever nearer to completion.

“There’s a card,” Kim observed.

© 1993 by *Monica Quill*.

Emtee Dempsey pulled back her head and thrust the roses forward. She still wore the traditional habit of the order and the great starched headdress seemed about to alight on the flowers.

"Open it," said Emtee Dempsey.

Kim opened the little envelope and removed the card. "A rose is a rose is a rose," she read.

That's what the man who brought them to the door had said.

"Absurd," said the old nun.

"Gertrude Stein," Kim said.

"Did she sign it?" Joyce asked.

"She wrote it."

"It's typed."

"One would have been sufficient to express identity," Emtee Dempsey said. "A is A. To say A is A is A adds nothing. Of course the woman was a fraud."

"Maybe she was just counting roses."

It made as much sense as anything else, Kim told Joyce when they had gone into the kitchen to put the flowers in a vase. "What florist was it?"

But Joyce had noticed no name on the truck, nor did the card reveal the origin of the roses. Throughout the week, as the roses slowly lost their freshness, Kim imagined the person for whom they had been intended. It seemed a shame that such thoughtfulness should go unknown. What if the misdelivery were the cause of a falling out? But such thoughts dissolved the following Saturday when the second bunch of three long-stemmed roses arrived.

Kim herself answered the bell. It happened so fast. She opened the door, a long box was pressed into her hands as the man said slowly and distinctly, "A rose is a rose is a rose."

The deliveryman looked ordinary enough. The truck at the curb had nothing on its side and there was no legend on the door either.

"What florist are you from?" she demanded.

He looked at her, his expression that of a child who thinks an adult is trying to trick him. He shook his head and without a word ran out to his truck.

"Whoever it is thinks in threes," Emtee Dempsey decided. "The next one will be the last."

It was not. Throughout March and into April, on every Saturday without fail, the roses arrived at the door of the house on Walton Street.

"Does one of you have an admirer?" Emtee Dempsey asked, peering first at Joyce and then at Kim.

"They're obviously for you, Sister."

"Obviously?"

"Whoever sends them expects you to understand the message."

"There is nothing to understand."

But even as she said it, the old nun's eyes became brighter. Surely she had asked herself the question before this, but never with the intensity she now devoted to the matter.

The scratch of a pen on paper was heard less frequently from the study. Often when Kim looked in, she would see the little nun sitting bolt upright behind her desk, staring fixedly ahead, lost in thought.

"A rose is a rose is a rose," Kim whispered.

Emtee Dempsey said nothing. She did not seem to have heard. Of course she might have been engrossed in some twelfth-century event, turning it over in her mind before describing it on paper. But Kim was sure that the old nun was thinking that a rose is a rose is a rose.

It angered Kim that she herself wasted hours on the same question, not because she wanted to, but because she could not get it off her mind. If nothing else, the person sending those roses had managed to insinuate himself (herself?) into the consciousness of the house. But it was an annoyed consciousness, a sense of being toyed with.

"Why do you always have such lovely flowers?" Katherine Senski asked one Sunday afternoon when she had dropped by for tea with her old friend Emtee Dempsey.

When Emtee Dempsey, with obvious reluctance, decided that they must not simply pitch the roses out, Joyce began putting them in less frequented places around the house. The suggestion that they go into the chapel had been vetoed by Emtee Dempsey. God only knew who the donor was, and the Almighty might not approve of the purpose of the gift. Joyce had put this week's roses in the living room. She might have hoped to prompt the question from Katherine. "Where did you get those beautiful roses?"

"It's a long story," Emtee Dempsey sighed.

"A story?"

"Sister has a secret admirer," Kim said, and earned a warning glance.

"What Sister Kimberly is putting so facetiously is this."

The old nun's account of what had been happening was crisp, factual, and complete, but if she had hoped to make it sound less intriguing, she had failed.

"Every Saturday since February! Did it start on Valentine's Day?"

"It did not."

"It was the last week of the month," Kim said.

She and Joyce had long since rejected the Valentine's Day possibility, and with relief. Emtee Dempsey's question to them had raised the unsettling possibility that some man, not realizing that they were nuns, was making amorous advances. A hurried review had convinced them this could not be the explanation.

Besides, the enigmatic message seemed to point at Emtee Dempsey.

"What have you made of the message?"

"Does it suggest anything to you, Katherine?"

"Anything! It suggests a score of things."

Emtee Dempsey put a blank sheet of paper before her and unscrewed her massive fountain pen.

"I will make a list of your suggestions."

Challenged, Katherine faltered. "None of them makes sense."

"We cannot rule out nonsense, Katherine."

Katherine's first guess was the three nuns themselves, then a wine ("Was there an accent?"), then the former Cincinnati manager. She went on to ask if Emtee Dempsey had ever had a student named Rose.

"Many of them."

"More than three?"

"Many more than three. And not all of them would be aware of one another."

"But three of them might be."

"I think this is a dead end, Katherine."

"It's just a thought."

Her other suggestions were less helpful still and Emtee Dempsey stopped writing them down.

Katherine sat upright. "I feel as if I'm failing a test."

"The sender has succeeded in annoying everyone then."

"Sister Mary Teresa, you have to think back to when you were a girl. This is clearly a romantic gesture.

"Three roses every Saturday for three months. Does that suggest anything to you?"

"Many things. None of them relevant."

"Some boy?"

"Need I remind you of my age? A boy, as you call him, would now be nearly eighty years old."

"So?"

Emtee Dempsey pursed her lips. That was the end of the conversation, but Katherine's question fed the imaginations of Kim and Joyce. The thought that an ancient boyfriend of Emtee Dempsey's was now sending her roses made the Saturday morning delivery almost welcome.

But the third Saturday in April the bell did not ring. No roses were delivered. As if by common consent, no one alluded to it. The game was over, apparently, and it seemed silly to regret it.

At seven that evening the body was found in the truck parked at the curb in front of the house on Walton Street.

2.

They had been in the chapel, making a postprandial visit, when the phone rang. Joyce went into the kitchen to answer it and Kim put her face in her hands to fend off distraction, but soon she was distracted by the fact that, after the phone was picked up, there was no further word from Joyce. Then there was the sound of the front door opening. Emtee Dempsey, kneeling at her prie-dieu just ahead of Kim, seemed oblivious to this. Had Joyce left the house? Five minutes went by and then again the sound of the front door opening and of Joyce running through the house. She stood in the chapel door. Waiting. But the old nun was still sunk in prayer.

"There's a body out front!" Joyce finally cried out.

A minute later, Emtee Dempsey stood on the front porch while Kim and Joyce went out to the parked truck. The woman behind the wheel might have been caught up in some sort of meditational trance, like Emtee Dempsey only moments before. Or she might simply have been drunk, as were a significant percentage of the avenue's habitués. Finally the old nun came out to the truck. Traffic began to react confusedly when the short and wide figure in the fantastic garb appeared in the street. Emtee Dempsey stood for a full minute looking in at the woman and then returned to the walk and permitted them to help her up the steps to the door.

"Call the cathedral rectory, Sister Joyce." A great puffing sigh as she made it onto the porch. She paused before continuing. "And the police, of course. Call the police as well."

A squad car came, arriving only a minute before Father Maloney,

who administered the sacraments with a sad look on his pocked face. Later, in the study, he assured Emtee Dempsey the woman had gone to judgment without benefit of clergy.

"I never heard the phrase used that way before."

Maloney, not familiar with all the nuances of the old nun's voice, took this as a compliment.

Richard Moriarity, Kim's brother and a detective lieutenant with the Chicago police, entered the house with a frown, seemingly certain that his old nemesis was once more creating trouble for him.

"What do you know about it?" he demanded when they were all seated in Emtee Dempsey's study. He was less frowny now, having accepted Joyce's offer of a beer. Kim didn't particularly like the idea that her brother's goodwill could be had for the price of a bottle of beer.

"I know what Father Maloney has told me."

"Maloney?"

"He gave her the last sacraments."

"When?"

"He knew at the time she was dead."

"She has been dead at least twelve hours," Richard said, perhaps rejecting the notion that the priest had special powers of discernment.

"Good heavens."

"She was holding a bouquet of flowers."

"What do you make of that?" the old nun asked.

"They're not the kind kids hawk in bars, the outer petals torn off, wrapped in wax paper. These are first-class roses. Still fresh."

"Thoughtful," the old nun murmured.

"Yeah. You got another of these?" he asked Joyce, flourishing his glass.

"Come back when you're off duty, Richard," Kim said, with an edge to her voice. God created whiskey so the Irish wouldn't rule the world, and beer is no better, as her father had always added.

"And bring your lovely wife," Emtee Dempsey said brightly, rising to her feet.

Richard had little choice but to go. If he had been offering rather than seeking information, the old nun would have emptied the refrigerator of beer for him. When he was gone, she said, "Call Katherine and see if she can come at once. Don't tell her what happened unless it's necessary to induce her to come."

Katherine needed no excuse for a visit to Walton Street. She was not as frequent a visitor as she might be only because she dreaded imposing on their hospitality and making a nuisance of herself. So far as the three nuns were concerned, Katherine could have a room on the second floor, or take the basement apartment, and stay permanently if she wanted, but like many elderly single women, Katherine cherished her independence even more than she craved the companionship of old friends.

"Were flowers delivered today?" she asked when they were comfortable in the living room. Joyce pushed the tea trolley up next to the old nun's chair and waited to carry cups. Kim and Katherine sat on the facing sofas that flanked the fireplace.

"No, Katherine, not flowers. At least not only flowers."

"Don't tease me."

"A dead body, too."

Katherine's hands flew up. "You're not serious."

Emtee Dempsey was perfectly content to tell Katherine what they knew, because she intended to ask her a favor.

"I want you to check on the woman's recent background."

"Do the police know who she is?"

"No."

Katherine looked at Kim and then up at Joyce, who was putting a cup of tea in her hands.

"How would you suggest I check on her?"

"I think I know who it is. Or was."

3.

The body discovered in the truck parked in front of the house on Walton Street had been the mortal coil shuffled off by Barbara Selton, aged forty-seven. Nothing found on the body indicated this, but a glance through the truck window had sufficed to stir Emtee Dempsey's memory. With that lead, Katherine Senski had a good head start on the police and she used it to advantage.

Barbara Selton, a native of Ottumwa, Iowa, had attended Knox College and then come on to Chicago to do graduate work in English. She had received a master's from the University of Chicago after four years of study and armed with that had enrolled at Loyola. She continued work toward the doctorate while teaching part-time at the college then operated by the Order of Martha and Mary west of the city.

"She was not a successful teacher," Emtee Dempsey recalled. "The girls were merciless with her, urging her to declaim poetry by the page, the better to get through her classes."

"How long did she teach?" Katherine asked.

"You wonder why we did not let her go. The reason is both simple and crass. She came cheap. Part-time teachers are paid but a fraction of a regular salary. Barbara was economical for us. These were the beginning of the bad years, Katherine. Financially. Not that Barbara was incompetent. Far from it. True, she had difficulty completing her graduate studies, but she was zealous. Once I was impressed to hear a student reciting John Donne's 'The Anniversarie,' only to learn that she was mimicking poor Barbara Selton. She was not a prepossessing person."

When Kim thought of the woman seated behind the wheel of the parked truck, it was her own horror she recalled at the realization that it was death she stared at. The face had seemed so small because of the hair—a wig, as it turned out—and the intensity of her expression as she stared sightlessly ahead seemed to gather the narrow face into the forward thrust of her arched nose. The jogging costume in which she was found seemed to explain the fact that there was not a spare ounce on her.

"She jogged religiously every day," Katherine said, trying to make her voice neutral.

"Twice a day," the maintenance man at the building in which Barbara Selton had lived with her mother and brother said, shaking his head. "Six-thirty A.M., she came out of that elevator, up that ramp, and was on her way. Twelve hours later, same thing. Every day. Like a clock."

"She should have been healthy to a fault," Emtee Dempsey said. "What did she die of?"

"Asphyxiation," Richard said.

The truck she was found in had been reported missing by Aronstein Delivery. Barbara had not died at the wheel. There was evidence that she had been held captive in the back of the truck and that she had died there. At the Aronstein garage, hoses were attached to the exhaust pipes of trucks whose motors were running inside the building, diverting the exhaust outside. There was evidence that such a hose had been taped to an air vent on the side of the truck.

"A mobile death camp," the old nun said.

Richard thought about that, but said nothing. "She must have been put behind the wheel after the truck was brought here."

Was that possible? Of course it was. Anything was possible on a city street. Passersby had trained themselves not to notice things. Besides, who would have imagined the woman was dead? She might have been drunk. Or ill. But dead? Even on Walton Street that would have seemed far-fetched.

"Do you know who she was?" Sister Mary Teresa asked this with a straight face.

Kim went into the kitchen where Joyce was watching the Cubs on a diminutive television set. She asked what was up but she didn't pay very close attention when Kim told her. The game was in the seventh, a scoreless tie, and the foe had the bases loaded with one out. Well, Kim could hardly expect Joyce to be as indignant as she was because Emtee Dempsey was misleading Richard. Whoever had killed Barbara Selton could benefit from withholding such information. It was unfair and probably illegal not to tell Richard who the woman had been.

"Don't worry about the murderer escaping," Emtee Dempsey said. "I consider it a matter of honor to apprehend him. The idea, leaving a body at our doorstep." She did not mention the roses that had been found with the woman, but it was an unspoken conviction in the house on Walton Street that there was a connection between the mysterious delivery of roses and the anonymous call, the voice not distinguishable as male or female, that had alerted Joyce to the body of Barbara Selton.

"Why do you say 'him'?" Katherine asked.

"I use the pronoun generically. Would you prefer that I said 'him or her'?"

"At the *Tribune*, now, we must."

But the usual expostulation was not forthcoming from the old nun. She looked across the room thoughtfully, but what she saw was not there.

"Barbara Selton was punctilious about grammar. It was another bone of contention with the students. Whenever she read exams or other papers, she was ruthless in taking off for grammatical mistakes."

"But you were the same."

"I trust that Barbara Selton and I were not alone in thinking that college students should be proficient in their native language. But she had a way of antagonizing as well as correcting."

"That sounds like her reviews."

"Reviews?"

"Nothing grand. She reviewed books occasionally for a west side shopper's guide."

"Tell me about her family."

This was addressed to Kim, who had visited Barbara's mother after Emtee Dempsey had agreed to inform Richard of the identity of the murdered woman.

The three nuns went to the wake, out of genuine sympathy at the death of one of Sister Mary Teresa's former colleagues, but also because it served to break the ice, if that was the appropriate expression. Victor Selton and his mother seemed frozen in something worse than ice. The mother could not have been Emtee Dempsey's age, but she sat hunched in her chair, gripping a cane as if she might soon do an acrobatic trick with it. Kim could not resist the thought that Mrs. Selton resembled a monkey peering out at the strange creatures that had come to visit her. Kasnieski's Funeral Home was not her regular cage, although she seemed to belong there, but she looked up while keeping her chin down and this gave her the expression of a somewhat coquettish rhesus. Victor stood behind the winged chair in which his mother sat, looking warily over it at Emtee Dempsey.

"Your daughter taught at our college," the old nun was shouting at Mrs. Selton.

No answer.

"She taught English and was much remarked on by the students." The old nun's voice lifted even higher, as she tried to elicit a response from the little dark eyes that looked up at her through a fringe of grizzled brows.

Emtee Dempsey inhaled, but before she could speak again, Mrs. Selton spoke.

"I'm not deaf."

"Thank God for that."

"It's Victor."

"I beg your pardon?"

"My son Victor is deaf. From firecrackers when he was a boy. My daughter was murdered."

The old nun took Mrs. Selton's hand and patted it. "Let us think of her as with God."

"She didn't believe in God."

"God believes in her."

"She would have a fit if she knew I let them have this." The hand slipped free of Emtee Dempsey's and indicated the viewing room. "A rosary. Mass tomorrow."

"You did the right thing. People sometimes say sceptical things and don't mean them."

"She called herself an atheist. She went on and on about it. The proof was evil."

She meant that her daughter had considered God's existence incompatible with evil in the world. Emtee Dempsey pulled a chair next to the old woman's and began to discourse on the problem of evil. It was absurd, but it made as much sense as anything else. Three or four people from their neighborhood came and that is all.

"We only moved to Chicago ten years ago."

"To be with your daughter?"

"She needed a home."

This enigmatic remark meant, as Kim was to discover three days later, that Mrs. Selton had brought with her the proceeds from selling her house in Ottumwa plus her husband's insurance money, and bought the modest house in sight of the Dan Ryan Expressway. It was one of those sad little streets Kim had often glimpsed from the expressway, usually in winter when they were clogged with snow. There was something pathetic about the houses, scrunched together, studies in fading grays and browns. Mrs. Selton was proud to be the owner of Chicago real estate—she had been assured it was a good investment—but to Kim it seemed a modest holding. Victor sat at the dining-room table while she talked with his mother.

"Losing his sister must be very difficult for Victor."

"They did nothing but fight."

"Where did Barbara work?"

"Work! Neither of them worked. When she wasn't running through the streets in that silly costume, she was in the back room writing."

"Writing?"

"She tried to write dirty novels." This from Victor, whose voice was surprisingly bass. It startled Kim to have him enter the conversation; she had assumed he couldn't hear a word.

"He reads lips. Test him."

Victor turned from his mother and actually grinned at Kim. He nodded. Kim felt like a fool, mouthing the words.

"No more taxes!" Victor cried, and even his mother laughed.

Something moved on the floor near the fireplace and Kim realized

it was a dog. A huge dog. It stood, dipped in a prolonged stretch, then turned its head slowly and regarded Kim. The head turned slowly away and then the dog slumped back onto the floor.

"Did Barbara publish anything?"

Victor shook his head. "They always came back."

While Kim was wondering what their reaction would be if she asked to see some of Barbara's work, Victor said in his loud voice, "You want to see some?"

He led her down a narrow ill-lit hall to a corner room, standing aside so that she could look inside. The drapes were pulled, the room was dark except for the green glow of a computer monitor.

"She always leaves it on. They told her always to leave it on."

How eerie to think that days after Barbara had died her computer stood in readiness here. Victor darted into the room and came back with a rectangular box.

"She'd kill me for showing you this."

They went back to Mrs. Selton and Kim spent the rest of the visit with the box on her lap, half expecting Victor to ask for it back. She had lifted the cover and looked at the top page. *Needy Blood* by Barbara Dempsey. Dempsey!

"Did Barbara ever publish anything?"

"She wrote for the shopper's guide," Mrs. Selton said. She seemed unsure whether to be proud of this.

"Did she ever publish a book?"

Victor's high tuneless laughter was the answer to that.

If the old woman and her stone-deaf son had moved to Chicago in order to be with Barbara, something their behavior rendered somewhat dubious, there was nothing to prevent their returning to Ottumwa now. Of course Kim did not bring it up, but back in Walton Street she put the question.

Emtee Dempsey asked if she were suggesting a motive.

"Their behavior is odd, but there is little doubt their lives revolved around Barbara's. Her room is the centerpiece of the house, particularly now when she is no longer in it. The other residents of the building may have found her eccentric, a determined old maid, but they all speak of her with respect, even affection. The only one who would seem to have a reason to kill her is one of those old students of hers you spoke of."

"That's nonsense."

"I know."

"Do you intend to read that novel?"

"I brought it home for you."

Emtee Dempsey sighed. She preferred old novels, and gloried a bit in the contradiction—novels were by definition new.

"Barbara Dempsey!" the old nun cried when she had lifted the cover of the box containing Barbara Selton's novel.

"You have no idea how many you have influenced," Katherine said with glee. "Besides, you can't expect her to publish a dirty novel under her own name."

"I have no expectations one way or the other, Katherine. This is amusing. I will grant you that." Emtee Dempsey did not sound in the least bit amused. "But I was struck by another name in this matter."

Kim and Joyce and Katherine waited. It could be a risky thing to take up Sister Mary Teresa when she uttered such enigmatic statements.

"Aronstein," she murmured, as if to herself.

They waited. The truck in which Barbara had been found dead was stolen from Aronstein's Delivery. Neither Katherine nor the police had discovered any relationship at all between Barbara and the delivery service. Unable to maintain her prudent silence, Katherine reminded Emtee Dempsey of this.

"Yes, yes. But think of the name. Think of the rose."

Kim said, "Gertrude Stein."

"Of course. The same number of syllables, accent on the penultimate. Clearly it was meant to suggest the author of 'A rose is a rose is a rose.' We might overlook this if the roses Barbara was found with did not connect her death with our mysterious admirer."

Kim was grateful her brother Richard was not there to hear this uncharacteristically fanciful parlay on the part of Sister Mary Teresa. The only thing to commend her guess was that it made as little sense as the events it was meant to connect.

4.

The funeral for Barbara Selton, doubtless due to the newspaper publicity, attracted a crowd, but far from disturbing Mrs. Selton and Victor, the bereaved seemed delighted with the turnout. Surely they must have realized that the pews were filled with the morbid, gawkers, the merely curious. St. Romouald's Church recalled better times in the neighborhood in which it stood. Many dioceses would have delighted to have the church for their cathedral. It was a vast Romanesque structure, but oddly proportioned, almost as wide as it

was long. The arrangement of the pews suggested a cruciform building, but this was not the case. Indeed, the location of the altar at the point where four banks of pews converged from the east, west, south, and north was due to a post-Vatican II remodeling of the church. This had occurred just prior to the flight to the suburbs that had left St. Romouald's a bare if not ruined choir. Thus it was easily able to accommodate the crowd that turned out for the woman whose murder had entertained Chicagoans for several days. That Richard had picked Howard Wren out of such a multitude was remarkable. But then Howard Wren had come to the cemetery as well.

"Who is Richard talking to?" Emtee Dempsey whispered to Kim. They were seated on folding chairs across from Mrs. Selton and Victor. Between them was the open grave and, mounted above it on the lowering device, the coffin containing the remains of Barbara. Father Maloney was fighting a generally successful battle with the fresh breeze that tried to turn the pages of his book before he completed his reading.

Richard was clearly visible on an angle to their right. His hand held the upper arm of a tall bald man in what might have been an official grip. The man had leaned toward Richard, frowning as he listened. He turned and cocked his head in a birdlike way before nodding. Richard let go of his arm and folded his own, a most unfunereal smile on his face.

Kim tried to let a shrug suffice for an answer, but eventually had to whisper to Emtee Dempsey that she did not know. Father Maloney was put off more by this whispering than he was by the wind. But soon he was sprinkling the casket with holy water.

"It is absurd not to complete the burial while the bereaved are at graveside."

"It is almost never done now, Sister," Katherine said.

"Are the relatives supposed to be capable of viewing the corpse, seeing the freshly dug hole, and then unable to see the body lowered to its final rest?"

"I'm not defending it, Sister, simply stating a fact."

Kim waited for this exchange to complete itself. Richard had stayed close to the tall bald man when the ceremony was over but he acted as if he were alone when Kim came up to him. But she had been sent on a mission and she meant to complete it. She thrust out her hand.

"I'm Sister Kimberly. Richard's sister."

"You're a nun? Of course you are. I see the veil." He made this sound like an accomplishment, but then anything compared with Emtee Dempsey's headdress would seem invisible. "Do you know the little old nun who was seated beside the grave?"

"Sister Mary Teresa? We live in the same house."

"I thought that's who it must be."

"Are you a relative of the deceased?"

He explained that he was not. His name was Howard Wren. Richard had been patient throughout this interruption, but when Kim suggested that Howard Wren come meet Sister Mary Teresa now, Richard drew the line.

"Mr. Wren has agreed to come with me."

"Under arrest!"

Wren emitted a chirping little laugh. If he was worried, he didn't show it.

"Come see us," Kim urged. "We live on Walton Street."

Richard led him away and there was nothing she could do about it.

"But who is Howard Wren?" Emtee Dempsey asked when Kim reported this. The old nun turned to Katherine, but the reporter shrugged her padded shoulders.

On the drive home, Joyce told Kim that the Seltons had been invited for lunch. That had been thoughtful, and any dismay Kim felt at the suggestion that she had somehow failed in her mission disappeared.

Emtee Dempsey herself took the old woman and her son on a tour of the house. Designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, it had been designated a national monument.

"Unlike its occupants," she added.

Victor moved his own lips as he read the old nun's but that didn't help. Emtee Dempsey devoted several minutes to trying to explain her little joke and then gave up. It took some of the zest from her role as hostess. But Victor redeemed himself at table when Emtee Dempsey mentioned the presence of Howard Wren at the funeral. She said it as if everyone in the world knew who Howard Wren was. The Seltons certainly did.

"Howard Wren," the old woman cried. "After all these years."

"How long has it been?"

"Oh, I never met him. Why didn't he come say hello."

"We were still in Ottumwa," Victor said. "Barbara made it sound like there'd be a wedding. At least that's the way mother took it."

"She had never spoken of any other man like that."

"Because no one else had ever taken her out."

"That's not true!"

"I mean after she moved to Chicago."

The time of this liaison coincided with that during which Barbara had been teaching at the college, but when Emtee Dempsey professed surprise—after the Seltons were gone—that she had been unaware of the young man's attentions, Katherine permitted herself to wonder if her old friend would (a) have been interested in the romantic life of a part-time teacher and (b) whether she would have recognized the seriousness of the relationship.

"Relationship," Emtee Dempsey repeated, but stopped herself from commenting on the use to which this abstract term has lately been put. "I do of course defer to you on such matters, Katherine. But clearly the matter is of interest to the police."

This all but overt reference to the grand doomed passion of Katherine Senski's life was unusual for Emtee Dempsey and had not been meant to cause her old friend pain in any way. What clearly interested her was the interest Richard had shown in Howard Wren.

Katherine said, "I don't see what I could find out about him, Sister. I mean about his connection with Barbara Selton. Unless they announced their engagement."

After what Victor had said, that was unlikely, and indeed it had not been announced, more likely than not because it had not happened. Victor seemed to relish emphasizing this.

"The boy always taunted Barbara about the fish that got away."

"The bird," Victor corrected. "The bird. His name is Wren."

"Like the great architect. Sister, I love your house."

Kim drove the mother and son back to their own house, helped the old woman inside, and accepted her invitation to come in. In the living room, Mrs. Selton hunched forward, gripping her cane. "Now that Barbara is gone I see no reason to remain in Chicago. I want to go back to Ottumwa to die."

"That's the only thing there is to do there," Victor said.

"Not the only thing, Victor. You were born there."

"But where was I conceived?"

"Victor! You go to your room at once."

He rose without protest, a man in his late thirties, punished by his mother like a schoolboy.

"Did he often tease Barbara?"

"In self-defense. Of course she had the advantage."

"How so?"

"If she spoke from another room or when he couldn't read her lips, she could get away with anything."

The old woman laughed but there were tears in her eyes. Did she miss those scenes of domestic rancor? Five minutes later, she was regretting that Victor was no longer with them.

"Should I call him?"

"He wouldn't hear you."

Kim could scarcely offer to go to the "boy's" room and fetch him.

"Well, I can tell you what Victor told me. A man called about Barbara's writing. He is interested in it and would like to see anything she did."

"A publisher?"

"No, he called himself an agent."

Mrs. Selton was delighted, but then she had seen nothing ghoulish in the large number that had turned out for the funeral. Emtee Dempsey's reaction, when told of this, was similar to Kim's.

"Is this what literature has become? The cynical exploitation of news events? I suppose from a commercial point of view, it wouldn't matter a great deal that Barbara Selton simply lacked the gift for writing credible fiction. *Needy Blood* may not be the dirty novel her brother imagines it to be, but it is an obscenity nonetheless. It seems to be deliberately bad. I cannot believe that Barbara was not capable of something better than this."

"If it's bad enough, it could become a bestseller."

Kim disputed this theory of literary success, but Katherine and Emtee Dempsey pointed out that she was the one who had brought the news that a literary agent had expressed interest.

"What is his name?"

"I don't know. His mother sent Victor to his room and he wasn't there to answer such questions."

"You needn't be facetious, Sister."

Kim explained that she was being quite literal. The old nun shook her head as Kim described the scene at the Seltons'.

"Imagine someone marrying into a menage like that. No wonder Howard Wren took flight."

"Sister, we have no idea how serious that was."

"That is why I must see Howard Wren."

* * *

5.

"He's looking better all the time," Richard said, when Emtee Dempsey asked him about Howard Wren.

"In what way?"

Richard tipped his glass and contemplated the beer that remained in it. Emtee Dempsey shamelessly offered him another and Richard shamelessly accepted, and Kim, to her shame, was sent to fetch it.

"Why begrudge the man a beer?" Joyce asked.

"A beer? This is his second. Besides, drink runs in my family."

"Like blood?"

"Almost. I've told you of my Uncle Dan. Richard even looks like him. I hate to see him drink."

"Beer isn't drinking."

"That's what my Aunt Eloise always said, until the hallucinations began."

"Ye gods. Better bring him a root beer."

"Do we have any?"

"I'll buy some."

In the meantime, Richard could have his second beer. Kim could see that Joyce thought she was exaggerating her fears, and she was, but better to exaggerate beforehand than afterward.

"But, Richard," Emtee Dempsey was saying, "lots of people jog."

"Every day? And taking pretty much the same route Barbara Selton took?"

"A coincidence."

"Uh uh." Richard accepted the beer without so much as a by-your-leave. "On purpose."

"But they hadn't seen one another for years."

"It was the route they jogged together in the sweet by and by. He quit for years and just went back to it six months ago. He said it was half conscious, running their old route, but now he sees that was the reason he chose it, out of fond memories."

"Of jogging with Barbara?"

Richard nodded.

"I won't insult you by telling you how far-fetched that is. You must have solid reasons for suspecting Howard Wren."

"He's not a suspect!" Richard cried. "I am relying on your discretion not to mention this."

To Kim it was clear that this was one investigation Richard felt so far ahead on that he could indulge himself and let the old nun into the results of solid police work.

Kim said, "We're always dragging policemen in here, plying them with drink, and then getting all their secrets out of them."

Richard defiantly tossed off half a glass of beer. But he spoke to Emtee Dempsey.

"You're right. There is something more."

"What?"

"I wish I could tell you."

"Richard Moriarity, that is unfair. You can't tease an old woman in this way. What in the world harm can it do if an old nun knows a little of what you have learned?"

Rather than being made wary by this patently disingenuous remark, Richard smiled as if reassured and went on.

"He made inquiries with a private detective on how he might locate Barbara."

"He told you that?"

"Let's say it came out in the course of our interview. I don't think he fully realized how significant that is."

"Which suggests that it means nothing. I mean nothing so far as your investigation goes."

"Oh, he emphasized that he had never gone through with it. The man he talked with is an old guy named Puller. He talked to Puller several times. Puller thinks he was just trying to find out how to locate Barbara Selton on his own."

"And you think he did?"

"It's possible. And then he took up jogging. Maybe they met, he tried to get things back the way they used to be, she told him to buzz off, and . . ."

"Richard, when you retire, you must take up fiction. Everyone is. Did you know Barbara Selton wrote a novel?"

But Richard took offense at the suggestion that he was telling a story rather than reciting facts. He even left half of his second bottle of beer undrunk when he left.

"Keep us posted," Emtee Dempsey urged him.

"On the progress of my fiction?"

"Now, Richard."

He stooped and kissed Emtee Dempsey on the cheek, a sign of magnanimity on his part, and embarrassing for the old nun. She had noted the sudden vogue of kissing all and sundry and considered it the trivialization of something important.

"But Sister," Kim said, amused by the old nun's embarrassment. "Most forms of greeting are trivializations of something. The hand-

shake is a checking for weapons, goodbye a carry-over from religious times. God be with you.”

“Gruss Gott, as Blessed Abigail Keineswegs was wont to say. You’re absolutely right and Richard is a dear. I don’t know why you badger him so.”

Kim was deeply engaged in defending herself before she realized how Emtee Dempsey had switched field on her. She must learn not to tease the old nun. Invariably it turned out that it was Kim rather than Emtee Dempsey who was on the run.

The following day, after they returned from Mass at the cathedral, Kim was on the run literally. It was seven, slightly later than when Barbara Selton had done her morning jog, and Kim had the sense of running against the current of the rest of the world, which was on its way to work. If Barbara had noticed this, she might have been unbothered by it. She worked at home, however, and was unlikely to have felt guilt. Emtee Dempsey wanted a firsthand report on what it was like to jog in Chicago. Kim took the route Barbara had. It had been publicized in the news and Kim had the idea that the media had made jogging along that path chic among semi-psychopathic sensation seekers. For that matter, she herself felt eerie running this route. It was impossible not to think of Barbara, dutifully pumping along this very path in Grant Park. If Howard Wren knew the path of Barbara’s run, he could have acquired it by reading the newspapers in the days after her body was found.

And then she saw him. He was unmistakable, bone thin, six foot three, the multicolored sweatband emphasizing his hairless pate. He ran with loose-jointed ease, without the grimace that identified the neophyte or obsessive runner. He seemed to be hardly moving, but it took Kim two hundred yards to catch up with him and that meant racing rather than jogging, so that when she came up beside him she hardly had breath to say hello.

His height varied between its normal and considerably more as he ran, but from either elevation he looked down at her with some surprise.

“Could we talk?”

He thought about it for some twenty yards, then shrugged.

“I meant could we stop.”

He frowned but then he looked at her again and Kim realized he had just recognized her. But of course it was silly to think he would know her, done up in Joyce’s Notre Dame sweatsuit and wearing a

White Sox cap. ("Joyce, it will get ruined." "That's what I had in mind." "You know you love the Sox." "It's not reciprocated," Joyce said with disgust. The White Sox were once more in the cellar of the weakest division in the major leagues. "Go ahead, wear it. It's a perfect disguise.") Kim had forgotten how unrecognizable she was.

"Sister!" Howard Wren finally cried, causing heads to turn.

"Call me Kimberly."

"This is a surprise. I didn't know nuns jogged." More heads turned but Howard Wren had stopped, sort of. He ran in place, bounding up and down, his knees rising and falling like pistons. Kim just stopped, removing the Sox cap.

"Keep moving," Howard warned. "Your muscles will tighten up."

It seemed the lesser of two evils, the worst being that she might simply die. Joyce would have been perfect for this errand, as Joyce herself had pointed out, but Emtee Dempsey had made up her mind. Now that she had met Howard Wren, Kim was glad she was there, although not glad about the running.

"I'm out of breath."

"You'll get a second wind."

"I don't have a first."

It was clear he did not intend to stop moving. How could he make it look so effortless?

"Come see us," Kim said.

"I've tried. I didn't know what to look under." He meant in the phone book. No wonder he hadn't found them. They were listed as the Order of Martha and Mary. Sister Mary Teresa refused to accept their present diminished condition as final and was fond of reminding them that Our Lord began with only twelve. To which the answer was that only one of the twelve had deserted, whereas the Order of Martha and Mary had lost all but the three of them. Kim gave this puffing information to Howard Wren, who continued to go up and down as if on a pogo stick.

"What on earth is a pogo stick?" Emtee Dempsey asked later.

"It doesn't matter."

But Joyce began to describe it and, infuriatingly, Emtee Dempsey encouraged her to go on. If she was delighted that Kim had had the good luck of encountering Howard Wren while jogging in Grant Park, she was disguising it better than the baseball cap had Kim.

"He'll be coming to see us."

"Good."

"Sister Mary Teresa, you were the one who asked him to come. I was merely repeating your invitation."

"Your brother seems to have gotten everything out of him already."

So that's what it was. Emtee Dempsey never quite admitted that she had a bad habit of competing with the police in the person of Kim's brother, but her reaction now was better than—worse, rather—than an admission. She had been interested in Howard Wren when there was a chance that she would find out what Richard now had. In the same way, she had not informed Richard when she verified that the body in the truck did indeed belong to Barbara Selton. It was a moment when Kim would have been fully justified in engaging in what Emtee Dempsey called fraternal correction, pointing out to her that she was being childish. But she was not without sin herself. She wanted the old nun to acknowledge that she had been lucky to run into Howard Wren and resourceful in insuring that he would be coming to the house on Walton Street.

"Sister," she said, "you know you will be able to learn more from one conversation with Howard Wren than the police have in all their investigations."

That was a mistake. If there was one thing the old nun was not susceptible to, it was flattery. Kim knew it was a mistake even as she said it. All the remark did was confirm Emtee Dempsey in her indifference to the impending visit of Howard Wren.

"I'll tell you the person I would like to see."

Kim said nothing but summoned up a receptive expression that cost her much.

"The literary agent who expressed interest in Barbara's writing."

Of all the perverse diversions imaginable, this seemed the worst to Kim. How like Emtee Dempsey to express interest in such a peripheral figure.

"How about the mailman?" Kim asked.

"The mailman?"

"The one who brought back all Barbara Selton's rejected manuscripts. He might be able to cast light on what happened."

But the old nun refused to take the remark as ironic. "A very Chestertonian suggestion, Sister. I will keep it in mind. But first things first. How I would like to speak to that agent."

"Maybe Howard Wren's detective could find him."

"Mr. Puller? Yes, I thought of that. But he seemed eager to tell everything to Richard, didn't he? I think we would be better advised

to proceed on our own. Besides, as your manner suggests, this is a very remote possibility indeed."

6.

Victor might be deaf, but Kim felt dumb calling again on the Seltons. It was the first time that it dawned on her that Victor lived the life of a retired man, although he was not yet forty. Had he ever worked? His occupation seemed to be companion to his widowed mother and, until recently, relentless gadfly to his older sister. What a menage the three of them must have made. For that matter, what a menage Mrs. Selton and Victor continued to make.

"How do you know someone is at the door?" she asked Victor. His concentration on her lips made her pronounce words in an exaggerated way.

"Because I tell him," called Mrs. Selton from the sitting room. The television was audible there and Kim thought of all the programs that had a cameo screen in which someone translated the speaker into sign language.

"Do you know sign language?" she asked Victor.

His brow darkened and he shook his head. "It's only good with other deaf people."

He referred to the deaf with disdain. In the living room, fitfully, as commercials came on, Mrs. Selton explained that Victor's deafness was not congenital but had been brought on by an explosion when he was eight years old.

"He was a very bright child. More so than Barbara had been."

"I only lost my hearing, not my mind," Victor corrected.

"God knows you kept your pride. Victor is very angry about his handicap."

"Handicap! I'm deaf. I can't hear. You make me sound like a golfer."

Kim could not tell whether the exchanges between mother and son were arguments or playful badinage or an unstable mixture of both. This must have been a very electric apartment when Barbara was here to contribute her two cents' worth. In any case, the point of Mrs. Selton's story was that Victor was educated at home more than at school, her late husband tutoring the boy and catering to his natural gifts. And Victor had taught himself. He was an omnivorous reader, never watched television, was indeed a gentleman of leisure. His mother was fortunate, more or less, to have Victor at her beck

and call. It was a nice question who was looking after whom.

"I wanted to ask a few questions about Barbara's writing."

"Victor can help you there," the old woman said, effectively dismissing them.

In the kitchen, Victor poured coffee and they sat at the table. It was not unlike talking with Joyce in the kitchen of the house on Walton Street.

"Have you read her novel?" Victor asked.

"Not yet."

He grinned. "Meaning you took a peek and couldn't bear the thought."

"No. Meaning that Sister Mary Teresa is reading it first."

"I'd like to know what she thinks of it."

"You'll have to ask her."

The suggestion made him uneasy, as if he were as reluctant to go out as the old nun was. She left the house at least once a day, in order to go to Mass, but so far as Kim could see Victor never went out. He confirmed this when she asked.

"Not even on weekends?"

"I do take Mother to church."

"But Barbara didn't go with you?"

"Sister, I'll be frank. I take my mother, I do not go myself. I get through it by going into a meditative trance."

"Church is a good place for that."

"Barbara's crude argument from the existence of evil could be easily dealt with by a theist. But no one can touch a solipsist rejection and it is to that I subscribe."

"Solipsist?"

She was sorry she asked five minutes later when he was still sketching his theory that Victor Selton was the only thing in existence, the world and other people a projection of his mind. There was no God in that world.

"In order to refute me one must in effect argue that I have a pain I do not feel."

No wonder Mrs. Selton preferred the television. That Victor was bright, extremely bright, was obvious enough, but even in this effort to establish his deepest unbeliefs, he seemed to be playing a game, pretending, not quite serious. How different Sister Mary Teresa was. However much she enjoyed the give and take of dialectic, she never forgot that the mind is made for truth, a truth it does not itself make.

"But back to Barbara's writing," Kim said.

"I have been trying to spare you. Barbara had no talent, no creative talent. As a critic, she had her merit."

"*Needy Blood* doesn't seem to be very ambitious."

He shook his head. "Why did she sink so low? I can't tell you. She lacked the talent for trash just as she lacked the talent for literature. She was meant to complete her doctorate and be a retailer of literature to disinterested youth. She could do no harm, she might do a little good, and it would have gotten her out from under Mother's feet."

"And yours?"

"Please don't misunderstand. As an adversary, Barbara was without peer."

She had also been the only one to whom Victor could really talk. Kim realized that he would keep her here for hours, if only to vent his own theories.

"You said that an agent inquired about her work?"

"Of course Mother took the call. I wrote down the message for Barbara."

"Do you remember his name?"

"No. It was difficult to take seriously."

"But Barbara did get the message."

"My note may still be in her room. Would you like to look?"

The computer continued to run. Kim might have imagined it to be a species of vigil light if she hadn't come to know Victor. He remained on the threshold while she looked on the desktop for the note. Clearly Barbara was a saver. On her desk things rose like layers of lasagna in a complete absence of system or order. From the doorway Victor urged her to rummage around and Kim did, confident now that any note Barbara had been given Barbara would have kept. In the event, she did not find the note, but found something better. It was a letter expressing interest in Barbara's work. The stationery was that of a New York literary agency, Adam Pieta Associates. It was dated two years earlier.

"Was the call from Adam Pieta?"

She had to repeat the name, but no recognition shone in Victor's eyes. "Maybe Mother will remember."

Mrs. Selton did not remember, but gave Kim permission to take the letter with her. Driving back to Walton Street, Kim felt a childish disappointment to match that of which she accused Emtee Dempsey. If the old nun was pursuing the literary agent spoor just to

be contrary, because she was unwilling to concede that the police investigation centering on Howard Wren was indeed plausible, Kim herself was disappointed that she had apparently found the name of the agent, thus feeding the old nun's contrariness. Kim had little doubt that very shortly she would be placing a call to the offices of Adam Pieta in New York.

Which is why the sight of Richard's car parked in front of the house on Walton Street struck her as a reprieve. And indeed there was a triumphant expression on his face.

"I've just come to bring Howard Wren's excuses. At his request. He couldn't make it himself."

"They have arrested Howard Wren," Sister Mary Teresa said, her tone the one she might have used to tell Kim someone had denied the unity of the human race.

"Two and two have a way of making four."

Surely Richard wasn't always this smug. He was reacting to Emtee Dempsey, just as she herself sometimes did, and it did no good to invoke the childish excuse that the old nun had started it. She at least had been corrupted by always being right. Until now. It was undeniable that the case against Howard Wren was strong. Richard ticked off the points.

"First, they had once been quite close and then broke up. Second, there is reason to think he never accepted this. He lived close to Barbara Selton, he jogged the same route she did every day, a sentimental choice. By the way, Kim, you were seen jogging that route."

"Is it illegal?" She was embarrassed to think of herself in that absurd costume. Besides, she ached all over from the exertion. Whatever the attractions of jogging, they eluded her. Joyce had begged her not to complain, as she hoped to get permission to jog regularly, if not every day. Kim promised nothing. It would be like Emtee Dempsey to require that they jog together, belatedly finding the thought of a nun out jogging alone unacceptable.

"Did Howard Wren inform you?" Emtee Dempsey asked.

"As a matter of fact, he hasn't mentioned it. That doesn't surprise me, of course. He is not what you would call candid, Sister. No, you were observed by a policeman on duty."

"Don't tell me O'Connell and Gleason were jogging!"

Richard laughed. "I wish I'd thought of that. They did have the area under surveillance. Add it up. He has been nursing a passion, more likely a grudge, for years. He has lived in his present apart-

ment two years. He jogs where the deceased jogged. Far too much there for coincidence."

"Barbara was accosted while jogging at night."

"That's right."

"Howard Wren jogged in the morning. Did he also jog at night?"

"Twice a day?"

"Barbara Selton jogged twice a day. You will probably find Howard Wren as surprised as you are to learn that Barbara also jogged at night."

"Nothing Wren affirms or denies carries much weight with me, Sister Mary Teresa."

It was painful to Kim to listen to Emtee Dempsey play with so weak a hand. Why couldn't she accept Howard Wren as the principal suspect? He was the only suspect. Everything she asked in an effort to disturb Richard's assumption served to strengthen it.

"Has he told you of his love of poetry?"

Richard shook his head.

"You are looking for someone who would have been responsible for sending roses here weekly for some time, someone who employed a notorious line of the poet Gertrude Stein?"

"He teaches English."

"Howard Wren?"

"High-school English. A private prep school called Gamaliel. He has been there since leaving the University of Chicago. He met Barbara at the university."

Emtee Dempsey nodded thoughtfully. Kim realized they had not inquired into Wren's background at all, not even after hearing from Victor of Barbara's past friendship with him. But Richard was not through. They had conclusive proof, half a dozen witnesses, that Wren had regularly jogged *with* Barbara.

"So much for his claim not to have realized she was in the neighborhood and never to have seen her while jogging."

"Have you connected Howard Wren with the stolen van, Richard?"

"We're working on it, Sister. I expect something on that momentarily."

In the wake of all this, and after Richard left, Kim wasn't eager to mention the agent's letter. As she had feared, the news brought Emtee Dempsey alive again. She held out her hand for the letter, eyes alight.

"It's two years old, Sister."

Emtee Dempsey smoothed the letter out on her desk and leaned over it. All she lacked was a magnifying glass.

"Did the Seltons confirm this was the man who called?"

"No."

Blue eyes regarded Kim through round spectacles. "It was another agent?"

"Mrs. Selton didn't remember the letter and Victor forgot the name. He had made a note for Barbara. I found that when we were looking for the note."

"This is sufficient, Kim. Amazing. Here is a New York literary agent expressing interest in Barbara's writing. If her novel is a good sample of that writing, things are much worse than I realized. Imagine seeing merit or promise in that!" She frowned. "Find out about this man before we confront him."

"Confront him with what?"

"You may be right," the old nun said grimly.

"About what?"

"That Barbara's death will not come as a surprise to him."

Kim fled to the kitchen, unable to witness further the disintegration of a once noble mind. Joyce listened to Kim's account of why the police thought Howard Wren responsible for Barbara's death and to the flimsiness of Emtee Dempsey's alternatives.

"I think I'll have a cigarette."

"I'm tempted to join you."

This shocked Joyce into changing her mind. She slipped her pack of cigarettes back in a drawer, hiding it under discount coupons. Did she think Emtee Dempsey would inspect her kitchen?

"How are you going to check on the man?"

"Adam Pieta? Ask Katherine, I guess."

"Good idea."

They met in the lobby of the Palmer House, their chairs an island of privacy in the midst of constant undistracting activity. Escalators brought people to and from the lobby, there seemed to be an amazing ratio of hotel personnel to guests, there was the muted suggestion of great things afoot on the mezzanine where several conferences were in progress. Katherine scrutinized the letter Kim had brought from Barbara Selton's desk. She shook her head sadly.

"It is a name one is unlikely to forget. Adam Pieta. You will suspect it is a nom de guerre. Not so. It is the name he was born with."

"You know him?"

"Yes. I didn't want to tell you on the phone and arouse hope. The fact is, I can imagine this man doing anything, including kill a client."

"You think Barbara became his client?"

"Let me explain."

The explanation was a tale of woe about a journalist friend of Katherine's. "Like all journalists, he dreamed of writing a book. A novel. Unlike most journalists, he actually did so. He was an intelligent young man, very talented, clearly destined for something better than life on a daily paper. He was a man of taste. But why go on? There is some law that such people will produce as fiction something which, were they to pick it up as somebody else's, they would immediately throw down. He was like a new mother. The novel was his baby, he had produced it, he was incapable of critical reflection on it. That would have been like rejection of his very self. For my sins, he gave it to me to read." Katherine took a restorative sip from her gin and tonic.

"Bad?"

Her eyes rolled upward. "Exquisitely awful. Unbelievably bad. For a moment, I hoped it was a hoax, that he knew it was terrible, but no. I dreaded having to give him my verdict. In the event, I didn't have to. He had sent a sample to Adam Pieta and the agent phoned to inform him that he had produced a publishable manuscript. I was astounded. And I was very curious about Adam Pieta. The first thing to know about him is that he is unique among literary agents."

Pieta preyed on the yearning to be published that afflicts so many. His ploy was to encourage writers, no matter how bad their effort, and then, when hope had been aroused, to offer to do a detailed analysis of their work. Because he was a busy man, because his overhead on Madison Avenue was what it was, he could not of course do this gratis. A schedule of his fees was enclosed. "God knows how many fish have taken that bait over the years. My young friend was one of them. Before it was over he had paid out two thousand dollars to Adam Pieta and his novel was no more publishable than when I first saw it. When it was clear that he could squeeze no more money from the man, Pieta submitted the book, got an immediate rejection, and washed his hands of the project."

"There's no reason to think Barbara got caught up with Pieta."

"If it was Pieta who telephoned, you may be right. He would not try to bag the same bird twice."

In the course of this conversation, Kim had begun to think that maybe Emtee Dempsey, whatever her motives, had stumbled onto something. It was quite easy to find out.

Katherine telephoned the Adam Pieta agency, identified herself as Barbara Selton, and said she was returning Mr. Pieta's call. The agent came on the line after several minutes' delay.

"Barbara Selton?" he said. "You say I called you?"

"That's right."

"Do you live in Chicago?"

"That's right."

"Well, I called a Barbara Dempsey . . ."

And then Katherine remembered Barbara's pen name.

"That's me. I write as Barbara Dempsey. You did call?"

"Of course I called. Barbara, as I told you, I think you have a truly saleable property in *Needy Blood*. It may need a little work. Good Lord, *Moby Dick* needed a little work. But I think I can place this with a major publisher. I'll demand major promotion, a full-tilt effort with the reprint and film rights . . ."

Katherine hung up. She sat for a moment, then recounted to Kim the side of the conversation she had not heard. "Honestly, he could talk me into it. How flattering it must be to a writer to hear a line like that."

"So it did happen."

Katherine agreed. "But what on earth does Sister Mary Teresa think it proves? Surely it has nothing to do with the death of poor Barbara Selton."

"I hope Sister will agree."

7.

She certainly listened to every detail with unflagging interest.

"Well, well," she said when Kim was through. "Katherine's description of the man makes his remarks about Barbara's writing intelligible."

"Anyway, he's out."

"Out?"

"Adam Pieta. We can't imagine that he flew to Chicago to kill a potential client. Barbara represented income to him."

"If she fell for his patter."

"Katherine says she herself would have fallen for it. She found him persuasive to a fault."

"Then we can assume he is. Sister Kimberly, I am convinced that this"—she touched the box containing Barbara's manuscript—"is at the bottom of her dreadful death."

"Not if Howard Wren killed her."

"It pains me that I have not yet had the opportunity to speak to that man. Nor am I likely to, now that he is locked up."

"You want me to go talk to him?"

"Splendid idea. Meanwhile, there is something I want Katherine to do."

Richard was considerably less enthused. "He refuses to see a lawyer, why should I let you bother him?"

"He won't see a lawyer?"

"Because he's innocent. Of course they're all innocent until proven guilty. This guy is something. He denies everything. I think if I asked him his name he would deny he is Howard Wren."

"I'm surprised you haven't had a psychiatrist look at him."

"All in good time. Let his lawyer ask for that. When he gets a lawyer."

"I will advise him to get a lawyer."

"Honest Injun?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die."

If she was childish with Emtee Dempsey, she could be childish with her own brother. They at least had been children together.

The sweater Howard Wren wore had "Gamaliel" emblazoned across the chest.

"I've taught there seventeen years. The headmaster has not come to see me."

It was understandable that Wren's school would be less than elated with the publicity he had brought it. The first stories—Jilted Jogger Arraigned—had not mentioned his place of employment but subsequent stories had emphasized Prep Prof.

"I had difficulty getting to see you myself."

The walls of the room seemed excessively featureless, the lights relentlessly bright, bringing out the highlights on Wren's bald skull.

"I had been on my way to see Sister Mary Teresa when they arrested me."

"She sent me here."

He leaned forward, excited. "Why?"

"She thinks the police are on the wrong trail." It seemed cruel to say, particularly because of Wren's reaction.

"Why?"

"It's all pretty circumstantial, isn't it?"

"Of course it is. A and B knew one another, A and B have been seen together. It's absurd."

"Why won't you see a lawyer?"

"I don't have a lawyer."

"We have one. Mr. Benjamin Rush. A wonderful man. Should I speak to him?"

He waved the suggestion away. "Tell me what Sister Mary Teresa thinks."

What else did she have to talk with him about? Kim went into elaborate detail, telling him of the old nun's fascination with Barbara's manuscript, the agent's call.

"Adam Pieta," he repeated, turning his head and looking at her with one eye.

"Katherine Senski says it is his real name. He did call Barbara and did intend to tell her he thought her novel was publishable."

By the time she got around to the roses and Aronstein's truck and a rose is a rose is a rose, his reactions were more moderate.

"She thinks Barbara's death goes back to the roses?"

"There were roses found with the body."

"Three roses?"

"Always three roses. A rose is a rose is a rose."

"Aha. Now that is something the police say nothing about, the roses."

"Leave it to Sister Mary Teresa."

"She is not discouraged?"

"If you knew her you wouldn't ask."

"Barbara admired her."

"Barbara Dempsey," Kim mused. "Not a very effective way to show her admiration."

"I would like to talk with Sister Mary Teresa."

"Mr. Rush could get you out of here. You could come have dinner at Walton Street."

When Richard heard that Wren had asked for a lawyer he was amazed, but when he heard who the lawyer was he had second thoughts.

"Rush! Why would he be interested in a two-bit case like this?"

"As a favor."

"Kim, look. This thing is as good as wrapped up. I can say no more now. I don't want Emtee Dempsey making a pest of herself. Believe

me, this time she would take a fall. Wren did it. He will be tried and convicted. Bet on it."

"I'll tell Sister."

"Only if it helps. She might take it as a challenge."

When Emtee Dempsey heard this, she held up both hands as if to show they were clean.

"Richard is invited. Tell him I insist that he come."

"Sister, he says they *know* it was Wren who killed Barbara."

"Of course it was. That is why Richard must come. Getting the right man is not enough. It is far more important to get the right reason."

It was a thoroughly confused Kim who called her brother and asked him to dinner on Walton Street the following evening.

"I don't know."

Perhaps he was thinking of other occasions when the old nun had pulled a rabbit out of a hat, identifying the murderer, emerging the victor. But she had told Kim not to let Richard know that she agreed that Howard Wren had killed Barbara.

"The Seltons will be here."

"That ought to be fun."

"Richard, it will be all right. Understand? Everything will be all right."

"Is Rush coming?"

"And Katherine Senski."

"I'll be there."

8.

Katherine came early, wanting a sneaky pete, a cocktail, before the others got theirs.

"She's thrown in the sponge?"

"Maybe, Katherine. But she doesn't act like it. I think we may be in for some surprises."

"But she said Howard Wren is the culprit."

"Yes."

"She wouldn't lie." Katherine seemed to have trouble not letting her remark become a question.

"Sister Mary Teresa would never lie," Kim assured her. Of course her way of telling the truth sometimes resembled lying, but the old nun was always happy to show that there was no question of lying. Could she somehow turn her agreement that Richard was right to think Howard Wren had killed Barbara into a denial?

"What was it that she asked you to do, Katherine?"

"I can't tell."

"Katherine! Now I wish I hadn't told you my news. Emtee Dempsey didn't tell me to let you know."

"Well, she swore me to secrecy."

The doorbell rang then and Kim went to admit Benjamin Rush. Dark suit, green and black striped tie, snow-white shirt, their silver-haired lawyer was as usual beautifully dressed. Had she ever seen him dressed informally?

"Has my client arrived?"

"Not yet."

"Hmmm. I am always nervous when someone is out on bail. How well do we know this man?"

"Hardly at all."

"I found him completely opaque. Does Sister Mary Teresa think him innocent?"

"No."

"Well, let's pray that he doesn't take a trip."

Emtee Dempsey had gone to the living room from the study and was ensconced in her straight-backed brocade chair chatting with Katherine. She greeted Mr. Rush with genuine affection. It occurred to Kim that the three of them were old battlers. Katherine and Mr. Rush had been Emtee Dempsey's allies on the Board of Trustees when she tried to prevent the sale of the college. He had saved this house and the place on Lake Michigan across the Indiana border, but the school had been lost. It was disconcerting that the three had been united in a losing cause before.

Victor and his mother came and Kim busied herself making them feel at home, which was why Joyce answered the door when Howard Wren arrived, and suddenly he was at Kim's elbow. "So this is the legendary house," he said, but his eyes were drawn toward the little old nun. "Will you introduce me?"

Why did she have the feeling that she was bringing adversaries rather than allies together? Howard launched into a eulogy, telling Emtee Dempsey how long ago he had first heard of her from Barbara.

"When she was teaching with us?"

"Yes."

"Was she writing then?"

"She was still at the stage when she talked of writing rather than wrote."

"I have been reading her book reviews."

"Good Lord, how did you find them?"

"It wasn't easy. Do you know them?"

Richard arrived and came immediately to Emtee Dempsey, glancing at Kim as if to ask if he had missed anything. The old nun told him that Howard Wren had just touched on Barbara Selton's book reviews.

"But that will be that for now. Until we have finished dinner, there is to be not a single word on the sordid events of the day."

She enforced the rule, an easy task once Joyce's meal was set before them. Veal piccata, asparagus, new potatoes. Dessert was lemon meringue pie, Emtee Dempsey's favorite. The old nun poured coffee, sending the cups around.

"I want to thank you, Victor, for finding the reviews your sister wrote."

"Have you read them?"

"They're marvelous."

"That was her talent, criticism. She took up fiction on a dare."

"Your dare?"

"No."

"Did you ever suggest she become more ambitious?"

"Writing for that shopping guide was a deliberate apprenticeship. Believe me, Barbara had higher goals in mind. I did attempt to prime the pump by sending photocopies of them to an agent."

"That is why Adam Pieta's letter is addressed to her as Barbara Selton?"

He nodded. "She was furious."

Across from Kim, Richard was having difficulty remaining patient. "When are we going to talk about the sordid events of the day?"

"We have begun to, Richard."

"Look, it's nice that Barbara Selton wanted to be a writer, it's a shame what happened to her, but it is her death that's immediately important."

"And why it happened. You are a writer too, aren't you, Mr. Wren? Or should I say Angelo Stone?"

Wren leaned toward her, an odd smile on his face. "Go on."

"Barbara's review of Angelo Stone's experimental novel can only be described as vicious. Don't you agree?"

"Beginning with that quote from André Malraux." He tipped back his head and closed his eyes. "Is it possible to write fiction now? Every housewife and movie star now writes a novel." He opened his eyes. "High-school teachers was her addition to the list."

"You published under the name Angelo Stone?"

He nodded.

"*Introit* was your novel."

"Barbara didn't know that when she wrote the review. I made certain she received a copy. It brought us back together again."

"As friends?"

"I expected better of you. The roses?"

Emtee Dempsey sighed. "To catch my attention, and as a clue. Gertrude Stein. The truck stolen from Aronstein's was another."

"But that does not link them to me."

"Stein means stone, doesn't it. What does Angelo Stone mean, the cornerstone?"

Wren was beaming now. "You're wonderful! You are everything Barbara said you were. After that review I had to kill her of course, but I wanted to be fair."

"You would reveal yourself in a coded way to me."

Richard wasn't going to sit still for that. "Look, this is all very nice, but let's not forget Wren was arrested and arraigned without any of this stuff."

"Sister Mary Teresa," Benjamin Rush said gently, "you are making my client very difficult to defend."

"Oh, I'll plead guilty now," Wren said. "I gambled and I lost."

"Tell us about it."

Howard Wren was almost euphoric now and he spoke of the bargain Barbara had made. She bet she could write a totally worthless novel and get it published. This was occasioned by a discussion of *Introit*, Barbara still not knowing Howard was its author. He winced as he told them how his novel had become her point of reference. If that could be published, anything could be. He dared her. She accepted the dare.

"The result was *Needy Blood*. God knows it was awful."

"Terrible," Emtee Dempsey agreed.

"She won when she got the call from New York telling her it was a publishable novel, that it would find a major publisher, receive a major promotion effort."

"And you killed her."

"Yes, but artfully. I made a little bet with myself. She spoke so highly of you, I decided that I would provide you with all you would need to identify me as the murderer. It was not a precipitous act."

"Cold-blooded murder," Richard growled.

"Lieutenant, if Barbara were here she would tell you that's a cliché."

"Tell it to the judge."

"I congratulate you, Sister," Wren said, bowing at his hostess. "I have lost twice."

Abruptly he turned, and dashed for the door, bowling Richard over as he left the room. A moment later there was the sound of a tremendous crash. Kim came into the hallway to see Wren sprawled across the floor. Joyce peeked out of the kitchen door.

"He tripped," she said.

Gleason and O'Connell had come in from their post on the porch and under Richard's shouted orders took Wren into custody. Richard seemed happy to get away from the house, as if he too had lost a bet.

Two hours later, after Mr. Rush had taken Victor and his mother home, Katherine was bidding them goodbye, obviously reluctant to leave.

"The beauty of it is that Richard can continue to declare victory."

Emtee Dempsey did not contest this. There was nothing triumphant in her mien.

"The poor fellow," she murmured.

"Sister, he is a murderer."

"Yes, yes. But he needn't have been. He thought he lost a bet, but of course he didn't."

"Thinking he could outwit you?"

"No, no, not that. He thought Barbara had won her bet when she wrote *Needy Blood*. Howard Wren wrongly conceded it was a publishable novel."

After a moment, Katherine said, "Of course. Adam Pieta."

"His judgment was worthless; indeed, if you are right, a deliberate lie."

The irony sank in slowly. But Kim found herself thinking of Barbara. Had she gloated when she heard from Pieta, herself deluded by his judgment, unaware that she was taunting Howard into murdering her?

"Unsurprising, I suppose," Emtee Dempsey concluded. "After all, he apparently regarded 'A rose is a rose is a rose' as a profound observation." ●

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EVAN HUNTER

There are some stories you have to look at twice to catch the meaning. Evan Hunter's "Someone at the Door," first published in EQMM in 1971, is one of these. The author too has different facets; you know him as bestselling author Ed McBain, creator of the 87th precinct novels and dozens of other fine mysteries. . . .

SOMEONE AT THE DOOR

by EVAN HUNTER

David's mother took him with her to Paris the day after his eighth birthday, which was July the fourth.

Paris was all lights. It was the best time he ever had in his life. Even if the business with the doorbell hadn't happened when they got back from Paris, he *still* would think of Paris as the best time he ever had. They were staying at a very nice hotel called the Raphaël on Avenue Kléber. Hardly anyone spoke English at the Raphaël because it was a very French hotel, and English was grating on the ears.

David learned a lot there. He learned, for example, that when someone asked, "*Quel temps fait-il?*" you did not always answer, "*Il fait beau,*" the way they did in Miss Canaday's class even if it was snowing. He told this to Miss Canaday when they got back from Paris, and she said, "David, I like to think of the weather as being *toujours beau, toujours beau.*" He used to speak to the concierge on the phone every morning. He would say, "*Bonjour, monsieur, quel temps fait-il, s'il vous plait?*" And the concierge would usually answer in a very solemn voice, "*Il pleut, mon petit monsieur.*"

It rained a lot while they were in Paris.

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He and his mother had a suite at the Raphaël, two bedrooms and a sort of living room with windows that opened onto a nice stone balcony. David used to go out on the balcony and stand with the pigeons when it wasn't raining. The reason they had a suite was that his mother was a buyer for a department store on Fifth Avenue, and they sent her over each year, sometimes twice a year, to study all the new fashions. What it amounted to was that the *store* was paying for the suite. David's father was account executive and vice-president of an advertising agency that had thirty-nine vice-presidents. The reason he did not go to Paris that summer was that he had to stay home in New York to make sure one of his accounts did not cancel. So David went instead, to keep her company. He wrote to his father every day they were in Paris.

Escargots were little snails, but they didn't really look like snails except for the shell, and they didn't taste like them at all. They tasted like garlic. David and his mother ate a lot of *escargots* in Paris. In fact, they ate a lot of everything in Paris. They used to spend most of their time eating. What they would do, his mother would leave a call with the desk for eight o'clock in the morning. The phone would ring and David would jump out of bed and run into his mother's bedroom and ask her if he could talk to the concierge for a moment. "*Bonjour, monsieur,*" he would say. "*Quel temps fait-il, s'il vous plait?*" and the concierge would tell him what kind of day it was and then he would hand the phone back to his mother and lie in her arms while she ordered breakfast.

Every morning they had either melon or orange juice, and then croissants and coffee for his mother, and croissants and hot chocolate for David. The chocolate was very good; the room waiter told them it came from Switzerland. They would eat at a little table just inside the big windows that opened onto the stone balcony. His mother used to wear a very puffy white nylon robe over her nightgown. One morning a man in the building opposite waved at her and winked.

The salon showings usually started at ten in the morning. Some days there were no showings at all, and some days they would go to the showing at ten and then have lunch and go to another one at two, and then another one around cocktail time. His mother was a pretty important buyer, so she knew all the designers and the models and they used to go in the back and everybody would make a fuss over David. He didn't mind being kissed by all the models, who all smelled very nice. Once, when he went back before a showing, two of the models were still in their brassieres. One of them said

something in French (she said it very fast, not at all like Miss Canaday or the concierge) and the other models started laughing, and his mother laughed, too. He didn't know what was so funny; he'd seen a *hundred* brassieres in his lifetime.

For lunch they used to like the cheese place best; it was called Androuet, and it had about 800 cheeses you could choose from. Every now and then they would go to a place on the Left Bank, but that was only when his mother was trying to impress a designer, and then David was supposed to just keep his mouth shut and not say anything, just eat. They had the most fun when they were alone. One night in the restaurant on top of the Eiffel Tower, his mother ordered red wine for him. She held up her glass in a toast and he clinked his glass against hers and saw that she was crying.

"What is it?" he said.

"Nothing," she answered. "Taste your wine, David. It's really lovely."

"No, what is it?" he insisted.

"I miss Daddy," she said.

The next day he sent his father a card from Notre Dame. On the back he wrote, as a little joke, "Can you find Quasimodo?" He had read *The Hunchback of Notre Dame in Classics Illustrated*. His father wrote back and in his letter he sent a thing that he had one of his art directors work up. It was a composite paste-up from the monster magazines, with very big type across the top saying: "Yes, *this* is Quasimodo! But where oh where is DAVID?"

The fourteenth of July, Bastille Day, fell on a Sunday and that was lucky to begin with because it meant there were no showings to attend. David woke up at eight o'clock and then slept for another two hours in his mother's bed and then they had breakfast and she said, "David, how would you like to go out into the country for a picnic?"

So that's what they did. They hired a car and drove out down by the Loire where all the French castles were, and they stopped by the river and had sausage and bread and cheese and red wine (his mother said it was okay for him to drink all the wine he wanted to while they were in France) and then they drove back to Paris at about seven in the evening, getting caught in the traffic around the Etoile. Later they stood on their little stone balcony and he held his mother's hand and they watched the fireworks exploding over the rooftops. He didn't think he would forget those fireworks as long as he lived.

The next week they were back in New York.

The week after that the doorbell started to ring.

The building they lived in was on Park Avenue and there were two apartments on their floor—their own and Mrs. Shavinsky's, who was an old lady in her seventies and very mean. Mrs. Shavinsky was the type who always said to David as he came off the elevator, "Wipe the mud off your shoes, young man." Mrs. Shavinsky wore hats and gloves all the time because she was originally from San Francisco. She was constantly telling the elevator operator, as if he cared, that in San Francisco all the ladies wore hats and gloves.

Even though there were only two apartments on the floor, there were four doors in the hallway because each apartment had two doors, one for people and the other for service. Their own main-entrance door was on one side of the hall, and Mrs. Shavinsky's was on the other side. The two service doors were in a sort of alcove opposite the elevator. They hardly ever saw Mrs. Shavinsky (except she always managed to be there when David got off the elevator, to tell him about his muddy shoes) until the business with the doorbell started, and then they practically lived in each other's apartment.

The first time the doorbell rang it was two o'clock in the morning on July twenty-ninth, which was a Monday.

David's bedroom was right behind his mother's and when the doorbell rang he sat up in bed thinking it was the telephone. In fact, he could hear his mother lifting the phone from the receiver alongside her bed, since she thought it was the phone, too. She said, "Hello," and then the ringing came again, from the front door, and there was a short silence. His mother put the phone back on its cradle and whispered, "Fred, you'd better get up."

"What?" David's father said.

"There's someone at the door."

"What?" he said again.

"There's someone at the door."

His father must have looked at the clock near the bed because David heard him whisper, "Don't be ridiculous, Lo. It's two o'clock in the morning." His mother's name was Lois, but everybody called her Lo except David's grandmother who called her Lois Ann, which was her full name.

"Someone just rang the doorbell," his mother said.

"I didn't hear anything," his father said.

"Fred, please see who it is, won't you?"

"All right, but I'm telling you I didn't hear anything."

The doorbell rang again at just that moment. From the other end of the apartment, where the housekeeper slept, David heard her yelling, "Mr. Ravitch, there is somebody at the door."

"I hear it, Helga, thank you," David's father called, and then a light snapped on and David heard him swearing as he got out of bed. David went to the doorway of his room just as his father passed by in his pajamas.

"What is it?" David whispered.

"Someone at the door," he said. "Go back to bed."

His father walked through the long corridor leading to the front door, stubbing his toe on something in the dark and mumbling about it, and then turning on the light in the entrance foyer.

"Who's there?" he said to the closed door.

Nobody answered.

"Is someone there?" he called out.

Again there was no answer. From where David was standing at the end of the long hall he heard his father sigh and then he heard the lock on the door being turned and the door being opened. There was a moment's hesitation, then his father closed the door again and locked it, and began walking back to his bedroom.

"Who was it?" David asked.

"Nobody," his father answered. "Go back to sleep."

That was the first time with the doorbell.

The second time was two nights later, on a Wednesday, and also early in the morning, though not at two o'clock. David must have been sleeping very soundly because he didn't even hear the doorbell ringing. The thing that woke him up was his mother's voice saying something to his father as he ran down the corridor to the front door. Helga had come out of her room and was standing in her pajamas watching his father as he went to the door and unlocked it. David's mother was wearing the same white nylon puffy robe she used to wear when they were in Paris.

"Did they ring the doorbell again?" David asked her.

"Yes," she said, and just then his father opened the door.

"Who is it?" David's mother asked.

"There's no one here, Lo."

"But I heard the bell. Didn't you?"

"Yes, I heard it."

"I heard it, too, Mr. Ravitch," Helga said.

"I wonder," David's father said.

"What do you think?" David's mother asked.

"Maybe someone rang it by mistake."

"Monday night, too?"

"It's possible."

"And left without waiting for the door to open?"

"Maybe he was embarrassed. Maybe he realized his mistake and—"

"I don't know," David's mother said, and shrugged. "It all seems very peculiar." She turned to David and cupped his chin in her hand.

"David, I want you to go back to bed. You look very sleepy."

"I'm not. We used to stay up much later than this in Paris."

"How you gonna keep 'em down on the farm?" his father said, and both his mother and Helga laughed. "Listen, Lo, I'd like to check this with the elevator operator."

"That's a good idea. Come, David, bed."

"Can't I just stay to see who it was?" David asked.

"There's probably some very simple explanation," his mother said.

The elevator operator was a man David had never seen before, about fifty years old, but with a hearing aid. David knew the other elevator man in the building, but he supposed this one always had the shift late at night, which is why he'd never seen him before. The man told his father his name was Oscar and asked him what the trouble was.

"Someone just rang our doorbell."

"Yes?"

"Yes. Did you take anyone up to our floor just now?"

"No, sir. Not since I came on, sir."

"And when was that?"

"I came on at midnight, sir."

"And you didn't take anyone up to the eleventh floor all night?"

"No, sir."

"What is it?" David heard a voice ask, and he looked past his father to the opposite end of the hallway where Mrs. Shavinsky had opened her door and was looking out. "What's all the noise about?" she said. "Do you realize what time it is?" She was wearing a big flannel nightgown with red roses strewn all over it, printed ones. Her hair was in curlers.

"I'm terribly sorry, Mrs. Shavinsky," David's father said. "We didn't mean to awaken you."

"Yes—well, you did," Mrs. Shavinsky said. "What's going on?"

"Someone rang our bell," his mother said.

"Good morning, Mrs. Shavinsky," David said.

"Good morning, young man," Mrs. Shavinsky said. "It is far past your bedtime."

"I know," David said. "We're up to catch the bell ringer."

"Did you say someone rang your bell?" Mrs. Shavinsky asked, ignoring David and looking at his mother.

"Yes, Monday night, and now again."

"Well, who was it?" Mrs. Shavinsky asked.

"That's what we don't know," David said. "That's why we're all here in the hallway."

"It was probably some d-r-u-n-k," Mrs. Shavinsky said.

"No, it wasn't no drunk, ma'am," Oscar said. "I didn't take nobody up here."

"Then why would anyone want to ring your bell at three-thirty in the morning?" Mrs. Shavinsky asked, and no one could answer her.

Later David's mother kissed his cheeks and the tip of his nose and his forehead and hugged him tight and tucked him in.

Mrs. Shavinsky told David about her demitasse cups the next day and when he hinted that he would like to see them, she asked him to wipe off his feet and come into the apartment. The apartment smelled of emptiness, the way a lot of apartments smell when there is only one person living in them. She had her demitasse collection in a china closet in the dining room. David told her it must be fun to have a big dining-room table like the one she had, and then he looked at her demitasse cups, which were really quite nice. She had about thirty-seven cups, he guessed. Four of them had gold insides. She said they were very valuable.

"How much do they cost?" he asked her.

"You should never ask anyone that," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because it is impolite."

"But you told me they were valuable, Mrs. Shavinsky."

"They are," she said.

"Then why is it impolite to ask how much they cost?"

"It's not only impolite," she said, "it's impertinent as well."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Shavinsky," he said.

"They cost several thousand dollars," she said. Her voice lowered. "Do you think the bell ringer is after them?" she asked.

"After what?" he said.

"After my demitasse cups?"

"I don't think so," he said.

"Then why would he ring your bell at three thirty in the morning?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Shavinsky, but it seems to me if he was after *your* cups he would ring *your* bell. Maybe he's after *our* cups."

"Do you have a valuable collection of demitasse cups, too?" Mrs. Shavinsky asked.

David shook his head.

"Then how, would you please tell me, could he be after *your* demitasse cups, if you do not even *own* demitasse cups?"

"I meant our coffee cups. In the kitchen."

Mrs. Shavinsky wasn't sure whether or not he was making fun of her, which he wasn't, so she sent him away.

That night the doorbell rang at one o'clock in the morning.

David was asleep but his father was still awake and watching the news on television. The doorbell rang and David's father leaped out of bed at the first ring and ran down the long hall to the front door and pulled open the door without saying a word.

There was no one there.

"Damn it!" he yelled, and woke up the whole house.

"What is it?" David's mother called.

"Damn it, there's no one here," his father said.

"What is it, Mr. Ravitch?" Helga called from her bedroom.

"Oh, go to sleep, Helga," his father said.

David was awake by this time but he knew better than to ask his father any questions. He just lay in bed watching the ceiling and realizing that the doorbell had rung again, and his father had gone to answer it again, and again no one was there. Through the wall separating his bedroom from his mother's he heard his father going into the room and getting into bed, and then he heard his mother whisper, "Don't be upset."

"I *am* upset," his father whispered back.

"It's probably just someone's idea of a joke."

"Some joke."

"He'll grow tired of it."

"He's got Helga scared out of her wits."

"She'll survive."

"How the hell does he disappear so quickly?" his father whispered.

"I don't know. Try to get some sleep, darling."

"Mmm," his father said.

"There."

"Mmmmm."

While David was investigating the hallway the next day, Mrs. Shavinsky's housekeeper came out with the garbage. Her name was Mary Vincent, but David was not sure whether Vincent was her last name or just part of her first name, the way "Ann" was part of his mother's "Lois Ann." When Mary Vincent came out with the garbage he was pacing off the number of steps from the stairway off the service alcove to the front doorbell.

"What are you doing, David?" Mary Vincent said.

"There are fifteen paces," he said. "How long do you think it would take to run fifteen paces from our door to those steps?"

"I don't know. How long would it take?"

"Well, I don't know, Mary Vincent. But whoever is ringing the doorbell manages to disappear before we can open the door. If he doesn't use the elevator, he *must* use the steps, don't you think?"

"Unless it's an inside job," Mary Vincent said.

"What does that mean? An inside job?"

"Somebody in the apartment."

"You mean somebody in *our* apartment?"

"Could be," Mary Vincent said, and shrugged.

"Well, that would mean just my family." David paused. "Or Helga."

"I didn't say nothing," Mary Vincent said.

"Why would Helga want to ring the doorbell in the middle of the night?"

"I didn't say nothing," Mary Vincent said again. "All I know is she was mighty angry while your mother and you were away in France and she had to stay here and work, anyway, without no kind of a vacation."

"But she is getting a vacation. Mother asked her if she wanted to take her vacation when we went away or in August sometime, and Helga said August."

"That ain't what she told me right here in this hallway, David."

"When was this?"

"When we were putting out the garbage."

"I mean *when*."

"When you and your mother were in France."

"Well, that sounds awfully strange to me," David said.

"It sounds strange to me, too," Mary Vincent said, "that somebody would be ringing your doorbell in the middle of the night."

"I don't even see how Helga could manage it," David said.

"Her bedroom is right close to the service entrance, ain't it?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then what's to stop her getting out of bed, opening the back door, ringing the front doorbell, and then coming in again through the back door and right into her bed? What's to stop her, David?"

"Nothing, I guess. Only—"

"Only what?"

"Only why would she want to?"

"Spite, David. There's people in this world who do things only because it brings trouble and worry to others. Spite," Mary Vincent said, "plain and simple spite. If I was you, David, I would keep my eye on her." Mary Vincent laughed, and then said, "In fact, I would keep *both* my eyes on her."

David started keeping his eyes on her that very night because the doorbell rang at exactly 2:13 A.M. David had a watch that was waterproof and shock resistant—his grandfather had given it to him for his seventh birthday. When he heard the doorbell ring he jumped up in bed and turned on the light and looked at the watch, and it was exactly 2:13 A.M.

"There it goes again," he heard his father say in the next room, but David was listening for sounds coming from the back door. He didn't hear anything. The doorbell rang again.

"Let him ring," his father said. "If he thinks I'm getting out of bed every night he's crazy!"

The doorbell rang again. David still hadn't heard a sound from Helga's room. He kept looking at the sweep hand of his watch. It was now 2:15.

"Are you just going to let it ring?" his mother whispered.

"Yep," his father said.

"All night?"

"If he *wants* to ring the damn thing all night, then I'll *let* him ring it all night."

"He'll wake up Mrs. Shavinsky."

"So he'll wake up Mrs. Shavinsky."

"He'll wake up the whole building."

"Who cares?" David's father said, and his mother giggled, and the doorbell kept on ringing. David still hadn't heard a peep from Helga.

"Mom?" he said.

"David? Are you awake?"

"Yes. Do you want me to see who's at the door?"

"You stay right in your bed," his father said.

"Someone's ringing the doorbell," David said.

"I hear it."

"Shouldn't we see who it is?"

"We know who it is. It's some nut who's got nothing better to do in the middle of the night."

"Mom?"

"You heard your father."

"Are we just gonna let him ring the damn thing all night?" David asked.

"What?" his father said.

"Are we gonna let him ring the damn thing all—?"

"I heard you the first time," his father said.

"Well, are we?"

"If he wants to. Go to sleep. He'll get tired soon enough."

The bell ringer didn't get tired soon enough. David kept watching the red sweep hand on his wrist watch; the bell ringer didn't get tired until 2:47 A.M., more than half an hour after he had begun. In all that time Helga hadn't said a word. It was almost as if she wasn't even in the house.

For the next two weeks the doorbell rang almost every night at 2:00 in the morning or a little after. David's father let it ring each time, without getting out of bed to answer it. Once, while the doorbell was ringing, David sneaked out of bed and went to the other end of the apartment, near the service entrance, to see if Helga was in her room. But the door to her bedroom was closed and he couldn't tell if she was there or not. The doorbell woke the entire family each time but they simply pretended it wasn't ringing. Each time David's mother would come into his bedroom after the doorbell had been ringing awhile, to see if it had awakened him.

"David?" she would whisper.

"Yes, Mom."

"Are you awake?"

"Yes, Mom."

"You poor darling," she would say, and then she would sit on the edge of his bed and put her hand on his forehead, the way she would sometimes do when she thought he had a fever, though he certainly didn't have any fever. The doorbell would continue ringing and his mother would sit in her nightgown in the dark, her hand cool on his

head. In a little while she would kiss his closed eyes and he would drift off to sleep, not knowing when she left him, not knowing when the doorbell stopped ringing.

This went on for two weeks. By the end of that time David was getting used to waking up at two in the morning and getting used to his mother's visits each time the doorbell rang. He was beginning to think, though, that once Helga left on her vacation, the doorbell ringing would stop. He was beginning to think that Mary Vincent was right—that Helga was ringing the bell just out of spite, just to cause trouble and worry for others.

But on August twelfth, Helga left and that night at two o'clock the doorbell rang. It couldn't have been Helga because she had taken a plane that morning at Kennedy Airport, bound for Copenhagen where her parents lived.

The next day David's father called the police.

It was David's guess that his father had suspected Helga, too, because he told the two detectives right away that it *couldn't* have been the housekeeper since she was now in Denmark. That explained why he hadn't called the police up to now; he *had* thought it was Helga and had expected her to quit ringing the bell after a while.

The two detectives didn't look anything like television policemen at all. One of them looked like Mr. Hartman who had the candy store on Madison Avenue and the other one looked like Uncle Martin, David's father's brother. Mr. Hartman did most of the talking.

"When did your housekeeper leave?" he asked David's father.

"Yesterday morning."

"And you say the doorbell rang again last night?"

"Yes, it did."

"Who else lives on this floor?" Mr. Hartman asked.

"Mrs. Shavinsky and her housekeeper."

"Her name is Mary Vincent," David said.

"Thank you, son," Mr. Hartman said. "Would either Mrs. Shavinsky or her housekeeper have any reason to want to annoy you?"

"I don't think so," David's father said.

"He may be after Mrs. Shavinsky's demitasse cups," David said.

"What was that, son?" asked the one who looked like Uncle Martin.

"Mrs. Shavinsky's demitasse cups. They're worth thousands of dollars."

"If the intruder wanted *her* cups," Uncle Martin said, "why would he ring *your* doorbell?"

"That's just what I said to Mrs. Shavinsky."

"Is there anything you can do about this?" David's father asked the detectives. "Can you leave a man here?"

"Well, that would be a little difficult, sir," Mr. Hartman said. "We're always shorthanded but especially in the summertime. I think you can understand—"

"Yes, but—"

"What we *can* do, of course, is to dust the hallway and the doorbell for fingerprints."

"Will that help?"

"If the intruder left any prints it could help a great deal."

"And if he didn't leave any prints? If, for example, he was wearing gloves?"

"Then it wouldn't help at all."

"Well, if you can't leave a man here," his father said, "and if dusting or whatever you call it doesn't come up with any fingerprints, what are we supposed to do? Just let this person keep on ringing our doorbell forever?"

"I suppose you could spend a night sleeping in a chair near the door," Mr. Hartman said. "That might help."

"How?"

"You could open the door as soon as the bell rang."

"We never know when it's going to ring," David's father said, "or even *if* it'll ring at all. There's no pattern to it."

"Well, perhaps you could spend a few nights sleeping by the door."

"I could spend a few *weeks* sleeping by the door," David's father said. "Or maybe even a few *months*."

"Well," Mr. Hartman said.

"Well," David's father said, and then everybody was quiet.

"Mrs. Shavinsky thinks it's some drunk," David said.

"It might be, son," Uncle Martin said.

"He doesn't use the elevator."

"He probably comes up the service steps," Mr. Hartman said. "We'll talk to the doorman and the elevator operators and ask them to keep their eyes open. Though, you know, there's the possibility he comes down from the roof. I'll check and see if there's a lock on the roof door."

"Why would anyone be doing this?" David's father asked.

"The world is full of nuts," Mr. Hartman said. "This is something like calling up a stranger on the telephone, only this guy uses your doorbell."

"But how long will he continue bothering us?"

"Who knows?" Mr. Hartman said. "It can go on forever or he can get tired next week. Who knows?"

"Well," David's father said.

"Well," Mr. Hartman said—and that was that.

That night David's father slept on a blanket in the entrance hall and the doorbell didn't ring.

The next night he slept in the bedroom and the doorbell rang at two o'clock.

The night after that he slept in the bedroom again but this time the doorbell didn't ring.

At breakfast the next morning he told David's mother there was no way to figure this damn thing out but that night he slept just inside the entrance door again. David woke up with a nightmare at about one o'clock and went into his mother's bedroom. He climbed into bed with her and she held him in her arms and said, "What is it, darling?"

"I'm afraid," David said.

"Of what?"

"That he'll get Daddy."

"No one's going to get Daddy."

"Suppose Daddy opens the door and he's standing there? Suppose he kills Daddy?"

"No one's going to kill Daddy. Daddy is very strong."

"Suppose. What would we do?"

"Don't worry about it. Nothing's going to happen to Daddy."

"I don't want anything to happen to Daddy."

She put him back in his own bed in a little while and he lay there and looked at his watch and wondered if the doorbell would ring that night. He was just falling asleep again when it went off. It went off with a long loud ring and then a short sharp ring but by that time his father was on his feet, making a lot of noise and unlocking the door as quickly as he could and throwing the door open and running into the hallway.

David lay in bed with his heart beating faster and faster, waiting for his father to come back. At last he heard him close the door and walk through the apartment to the bedroom.

"Did you see him?" David's mother asked.

"No. But I heard a door slamming."

"What do you mean?"

"As I was unlocking *our* door, just after the ringing, I heard a door slamming somewhere."

"Probably the door leading to the service steps."

"Yes," David's father said. He paused. "Where's David? Is he asleep?"

"Yes. He had a bad dream a little while ago."

"Poor kid. What shall I do, honey? Do you think our friend will be back tonight?"

"I doubt it," David's mother said, and paused. Her voice through the bedroom wall sounded very funny when she spoke again. "Come here," she said.

That night was the last time the doorbell rang.

What had happened, David supposed, was that his father had frightened the intruder away. He had jumped to his feet at the first long ring and was already unlocking the door by the time the intruder had pressed the bell the second time, which was probably why the second ring had been so short. The intruder must have realized a trap had been set, so he ran for the service steps just as David's father unlocked the door. That was probably the sound his father had heard—the service-steps door slamming behind the intruder as he ran away. David's father didn't get to see anyone by the time he rushed into the hallway, but he certainly must have scared whoever had been ringing the bell because that was the end of it.

In September school started and Helga came back from Denmark with stories about everything she had done. David began thinking about Paris again only because Helga had just come back from Europe. He would lie in bed each night and think about Paris and one night he suddenly got the idea. He began laughing and then stuck his head under the pillow because he didn't want them to hear him in the bedroom next door. He kept laughing, though, under his pillow. It seemed to him that it would be a great joke. The more he thought about it, the funnier it seemed.

He took his head out from under the pillow and listened. The apartment was quiet. He threw back the covers, got out of bed, tiptoed to the door of his mother's bedroom, and peeked in. She was lying with his father's arms around her, the blanket down over her hip, sort of.

David covered his mouth with his hand because he felt another laugh coming on and then he tiptoed to Helga's bedroom. Her door was closed. He could hear her heavy breathing behind it.

He went to the service door of the apartment.

Carefully he unlocked the door without making a sound, trying his best not to laugh. Then he opened the door and peeked out into the service alcove. No one was there. It seemed to him that he could almost hear the whole building breathing in its sleep.

He picked up an empty milk bottle from where it was standing outside the service door and used it to prop the door open and then went out of the service alcove and into the area just outside the elevators. He listened to make sure the elevator wasn't coming up and then he went to the front door.

He almost laughed again.

He listened.

He couldn't hear anything.

This was going to be a great joke.

He reached out for the doorbell.

He rang the bell once. He heard it ringing inside the apartment. What he was going to do was run right back through the service entrance and then pretend he didn't know what had happened, if he could keep a straight face. He was only going to ring the bell that once, as a joke. But somehow, standing there in the hallway with the building asleep all around him, he rang the bell again. And then, he didn't know why, he rang it again. And again.

As he rang it he could remember the phone ringing each morning at eight o'clock at the Hôtel Raphaël, and his running into his mother's bedroom and climbing into her bed to ask the concierge *Quel temps fait-il?* He kept ringing the bell and ringing it. He didn't even hear the front door when it opened. His father was in pajamas, his mother was standing beside him in her nightgown.

"David!" she said. "What are you doing?"

David started to smile, half expecting his mother to laugh or run her hand over his head. But instead she was looking down at him with a very puzzled look on her face and he decided not to smile because he had the feeling something terrible was going to happen, though he didn't know what. He ducked his head.

"I'm sorry," he said.

They were all quiet for a while and then his father said, "Why did you ring the doorbell, David?"

"I don't know."

"You rang it, didn't you?" his father said.

"Yes."

"Well, why?"

"I thought it would be a good joke."

"A *what*?" his father said.

"A joke."

"A joke? After all we went through last month? You thought it would be a joke to—"

"I didn't do it last month."

"I know that but how could you—"

"This is the first time I ever rang it."

"I know that," his father said, and the hallway became silent.

"Why did you do it, David?" his mother asked.

He looked up at her, wanting to explain, but a hundred crazy things popped into his head instead. He wanted to say, Mom, do you remember the little stone balcony with the big windows where we used to have our breakfast every morning, do you remember the man who waved and winked at you? He wanted to say, Mom, do you remember the models kissing me at the salons and those two with their brassieres that time, the way you laughed, do you remember? Do you remember driving out to have a picnic lunch by the Loire on Bastille Day, and the wild traffic around the Etoile that night when we drove back into the city, and the fireworks later, do you remember holding my hand on the little stone balcony outside our room?

"Why?" she asked again. "Why did you ring the doorbell, David?"

"I don't know," he said.

"You *must* have had a reason," his mother insisted.

"No, Mom," he said. "I didn't have any reason."

She kept looking at him.

His father sighed then and said, "Well, it's very late. Let's all get back to bed."



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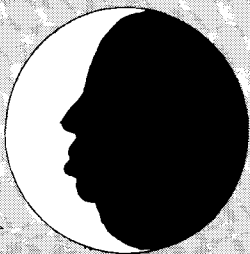
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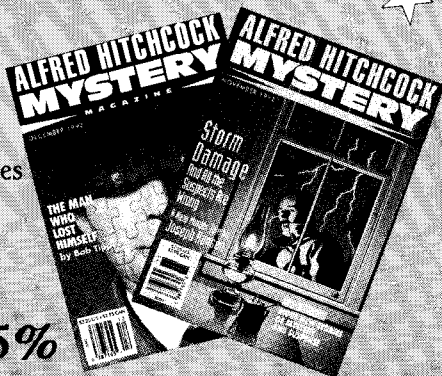
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